



VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL

AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 5

AUTHOR: NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR: SIOKAZUNOKO

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LIVE comment

zizi!

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IS SHE A NEW VTUBER AROUND HERE?

IT'S AN AWAKENING?!

FIRST CHAMI-CHAN, NOW HER...

THE LIVE-ON APTITUDE SURGERY WAS A SUCCESS.

ANOTHER FINE JOB BY THE (IN)FAMOUS SURGEON, DR. AWAYUKI.

IT'S OKAY TO CRY, MASHIRON.

YEP, THIS IS THIRD GEN, ALL RIGHT.

¥ 50,000
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

WELCOME BACK.

THIRD GEN
ANNIVERSARY
STREAM

#MACH





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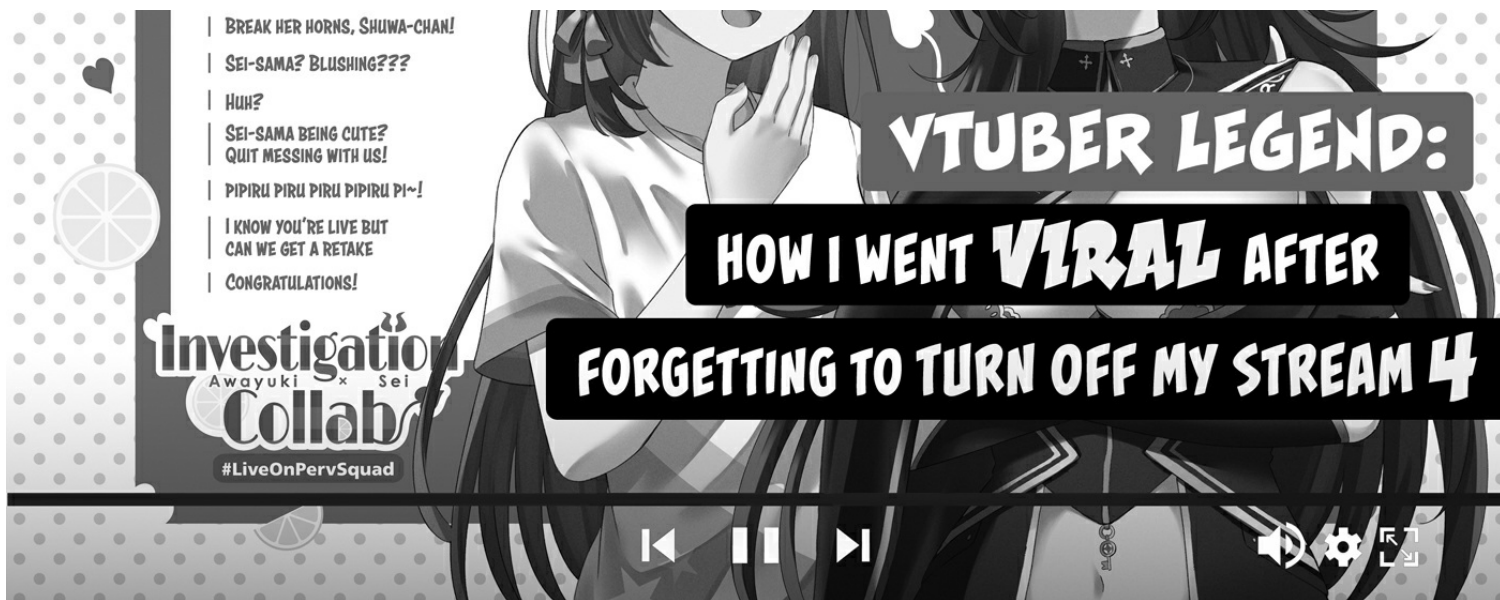
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Story Summary

99,999,999 views • May 20, 2022

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💣Attention💣

ALL VTUBER LEGEND VOLUME 4 GAMERS 🎮🎮🎮,

Sei-sama is in great danger 🆘, and she needs YOUR help to wipe out 💀 her channel's monetization issues at the Live-On Lagoon 🌊🌊🌊.

To do this, she needs Live-On to have meme-filled streams of WorCra 📺, MonSlay 🗡️, and kusoge 🤪🤪.

To help her, all she needs is your credit card number 💳, and the three numbers on the back 📁 and the expiration month and year 📅.

But you gotta be quick ⚡ so that Sei-sama can get back to the memes 📺, and make Shion-mama her **EPIC** new girlfriend 🤪🤪🤪.



Prologue

“Let’s all have a sleepover!”

Hikari-chan’s lively voice rang in my ear.

With Sei-sama’s monetization issues miraculously worked out and Shion-senpai now officially going out with her, I was starting to sardonically wonder if tanking my own monetization could net me a nice girlfriend, but these thoughts were just a brief reprieve from another fast-approaching event. At this moment, everyone in third gen was hashing out future plans on an off-stream call. The subject: “What should we do to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the third gen’s debut?”

Yes, after all those head-spinning days that had me forgetting the word “boredom” ever existed, we were now coming up on a full year since it all began. And hey, who doesn’t want to do something special for an anniversary?

Me, Mashiron, and Chami-chan were all groaning about our lack of ideas, but true to her extrovert roots (sanity not included), it was Hikari-chan who broke the deadlock.

“Mashiron and Awayuki-chan did that sleepover stream before, right? Hikari was *super* jealous of that! So won’t it be super-*duper* fun if the four of us get together for a sleepover?”

“A sleepover, huh?” mused Mashiron. “Sounds good to me. It’s been a while, so I’d like to see everyone in person.”

“Heh heh heh,” chuckled Chami-chan. “Sleeping over with a crowd... If I can pull that off, I’ll practically be rubbing elbows with the normie population! The thought of meeting face-to-face gets me a little nervous, but I should be fine if it’s with my genmates.”

“I concur!” I chimed in. “Come to think of it, I don’t believe the third gen has ever gathered everyone together in real life for a stream, so I’m certain the

viewers would be delighted!”

“Oh, is that support Hikari’s hearing? Ooh, ooh, how about this? Since we don’t get everyone together too often, how about we take the opportunity to stream for a whole day?! We’ll start the stream in the morning or so and keep it running all the way till we fall asleep!”

“That might just be your penchant for endurance streams talking...”

Mashiron’s knee-jerk jab got some laughs from the others, but nobody here was against it. If anything, having a long runtime meant that we could fit in plenty of themed segments, so everyone started coming forward with ideas that they had cooked up but never managed to propose, which got the call even more fired up.

“How about we try some games together?” suggested Chami-chan. “I’ll bring my ASMR mic, so maybe we could do a batsu game of making the loser say embarrassing lines to the chat!”

“Games! Ooh, that sounds great! Hikari won’t lose!”

“Now it’s sounding like something *you* want to get a kick out of, Chami-chan...but oh well,” Mashiron muttered. “I guess I’ll draw us a sleepover illustration for the stream’s thumbnail.”

“Oh, then how about Chami-chan and I do a cooking stream when dinnertime comes around?” I suggested.

The details were fleshed out more and more. It followed that soon enough, we were all settled on the sleepover anniversary stream idea.

“Also, I hope we can put on some sort of mini-concert. I’d love to sing with everyone!” I said.

“In that case, how about we hold the sleepover at Hikari’s house? Hikari lives alone and has a soundproofed room, so we can sing all we want!” Hikari-chan volunteered.

“Sounds great, I think we’ll take you up on that.”

“I’m starting to get excited for this.”

With that, the plan and the place were decided, meaning the goal of this

conversation had been accomplished. Everyone started loosening up out of relief, making the mood of the call a bit more laid-back. It was all thanks to Hikari-chan for fearlessly taking the initiative and putting forth a great idea; truly a fine play, indeed.

“Is there anything else we should bring?” Chami-chan asked. “I’m already bringing the mic.”

“Perhaps I’ll go ahead and bring the StroZero~!”

“Heh, I guess if Awa-chan’s joining in, it’s only fair to bring out Shuwa-chan too. Sure, let’s have some drinks.”

“It’s a drinking party! Teehee, Hikari’s always wanted to try doing a sleepover with you all. As the proposer of this plan, Hikari’s gonna work hard to make it fun for everyone!”

What a sweet girl... Dear Hikari-chan’s such a sweet girl...

The four of us had been honing our own and each other’s skills since the day of our debuts. I could only hope that we’d have a wonderful anniversary where we could celebrate our growth and deepen our bonds.

We stayed on for a bit longer to have some idle chat before ending the call. It wouldn’t be long until our first anniversary, and we had another collab even sooner that would eclipse anything we’d attempted before, so I figured it best to just take it slow and keep my nose to the grindstone in between the sleepover preparations.

Chapter 1: Live-On All-Star Collab: *Amidst Us*

“All-Star.”

Is there a single heart that this term does not stir? The thought of two things you love joining forces is enough to make one jump for joy, but when the size goes from a one-on-one collab to a huge gathering, the feeling too goes from mere excitement to watching a dream come true.

That said, while the fantasy of an all-star collab is one shared by many, attempting to make it a reality makes one aware of just how many insurmountable obstacles stand in the way. Even if you get everyone’s schedules settled, you still have to figure out the event’s details and pacing while ensuring your stars are treated fairly and can get along with each other, a task that gets harder with each additional star on the roster.

Bringing all of that together demands an appropriate stage. Live-On currently had eleven streamers on its roster when counting Awa-chan and Shuwa-chan as one person, and each one was an all-star in her own mind. Finding a stage big enough for everyone was a tall order...or so I’d once thought.

You see, that problem was solved by a single PC game. Come now, dear readers, and shout the words along with me: “Technology is incredible!”

“The Dream Team Live-On-wide All-Star Collab project, *Amidst Us*, begins right here, right noooooow!!!”

When Shion-mama gave the signal to start, all eleven streamers including myself raised our voices in a cheer.

“Your host for this event is none other than everyone’s mama, Shion Kaminari! Now then, let’s have our players introduce themselves, starting with first gen!”

The introductions started with Hareru-senpai in first gen and continued with the second and then third gens, in case anyone needed proof that everyone really was here.

“Pshhh! I got so hype for this collab that I mixed the all-stars of StroZero and created a new flavor I dub Kokorone Concoction, which I just took a hit of! It’s Shuwa-chan, woohoo!!! Also, I’m definitely gonna hafta drink all the leftover flat StroZeros over the next few days, but who cares about that?!”

“Well now! How would you describe this flavor?” Shion-mama asked.

“It has that immoral feeling of doin’ something you know you’re not supposed to.”

“Is...that a good thing?”

“As a pioneer on the Zero frontier, I must say that I’m quite satisfied with my work of bringing this Kokorone Concoction flavor into the world.”

“No, see, I meant like, how does it *taste*?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Say no more.”

My turn came and went with Shion-mama’s support. Fourth gen kept the ball rolling with their introductions, and once Kaeru had finished hers, there wasn’t a shadow of a doubt that all eleven of us had gathered in one place.

: damn, they really got EVERYONE

: based

: Never in my life have I been so moved and yet so terrified.

: It's like watching something where everyone is the spawn of Yujiro Hanma.

: thought i saw the avengers for a sec, but nope, it's the YABEngers

: I'm getting some abnormally high Hume levels from this group.

: God bless werewolf games

: I can see them doing a match where everyone's an

Imitator

: kusa

: Are we not getting Awa-chan?

: Guess there's no light snow falling tonight, oh well.

: Don't worry about Awa-chan, she's sleeping right next to me.

: cool, she needs the help to deal with her hangover

: What's Shuwa-chan cooking up a High Potion for?

: does she have a horse head mask she's been hiding from us?

: I bet that one Uma Musume char's waiting for her to join

: you mean Agnes Tachyon?

: I'm so excited for all the first meetings here!

: it's like the moment before a bungee jump...

“I'd like us to get as many games in as we can, so I'll go ahead and explain today's plan.”

It wouldn't do to stare at the abject chaos in the chat box all day, so Shion-mama introduced the subject of the current collab. Like I said before, this was a collab through a game called *Amidst Us*.

For context, there's a type of party game known as *Mafia* or *Werewolf*. It's the one where a few of the players are selected to play as werewolves while the rest are made to play as humans; the werewolves attack the humans in secret, while the humans attempt to deduce who the werewolves are and defeat them first. There are probably plenty of people out there who've played a variant at some point. The game we were playing now, *Amidst Us*, was a PC game based on that party game.

The game's backstory was that all of the players (eleven, in our case) were

living ordinary lives before suddenly being kidnapped. They wake up to find themselves imprisoned inside a facility made up of sterile, sci-fi-looking rooms. They're told that to escape, they must complete a number of simple minigames present in each room and fill up the escape meter by doing so. These "Inmates," as they're called, are left with no choice, but they soon learn that a number of so-called "Imitators" were slipped into their ranks by their captors...

Or something along those lines.

The game was played via an overhead view, like one of those retro 2D games. In fact, that led to one of its biggest strengths: it was incredibly intuitive to play. Inmates didn't have any form of defense besides movement, so their goal was to move between each room and complete as many of the simple minigames as they could to escape. The Imitators had an attack that would instantly kill a nearby Inmate, so with some assistance provided by the facility staff, their goal was to eliminate all of the Inmates. The gameplay was streamlined to the bare essentials, while the "meeting" segments that peppered a match made sure to capture all the intrigue that the genre was known for.

"I think that'll do for the explanation. Honestly, I think it's easier to just watch the game in action, so let's get into the first match!"

As Shion-mama said, a stream is worth a thousand words. We all did a test play before just in case, so I doubted that we'd get bogged down by the rules. I planned to go through the match with that experience in my mind.

"Also, to be clear, we're all friends and beginners here, so expect a *very* casual match with the etiquette kept to a minimum. And while this goes for any of our streams, if somebody makes a mistake, there will be *no* bad-mouthing them in the chat! Now then: round one, start!!!"

At Shion-mama's call, the screen switched away from the waiting lobby. Of course, looking at the chat was off-limits from here on out.

All right, this was our first full group-wide collab, and it was time to have some fun!

"Let's see, what side am I on..."

The game started by randomly choosing two players to be Imitators. This was

where you found out if you were the hunter or the hunted.

I was...an Inmate. My goal was to either evade the Imitators and escape from the facility or eliminate the Imitators by figuring out their identities and “expelling” them from the group. Our voice chat would be muted from here on out, with any further conversation to be saved for the first meeting.

“Sweet! Get ready to witness the deduction techniques of the modern-day Edoylegawa Sherlock Ranpolmes the 0th Conan!”

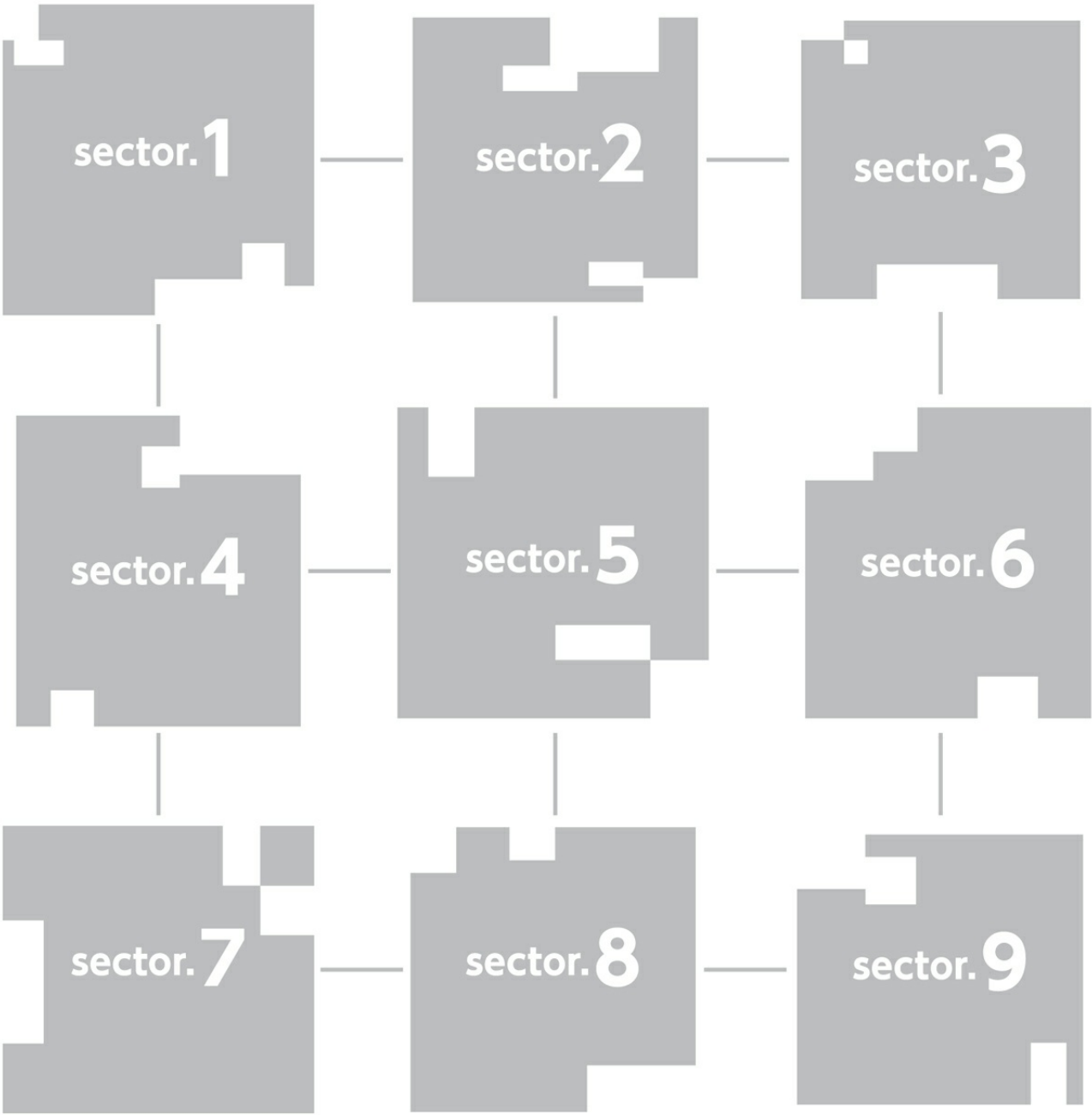
Now I finally had control of my character, so this dance with death had duly begun.

Like Shion-mama explained earlier, each room had minigames for us to complete if we wanted to fill the escape gauge, but where would I begin? For a *very* general idea, the game’s map looked something like this:

AMIDST US SIMPLIFIED MAP

Basic Rules

- Players are split into Inmates and Imitators.
(In this case, two of the eleven players are Imitators.)
- Inmates have no way to attack.
- Imitators can kill Inmates if they get close.
- Imitators are able to activate obstacles to interfere with the Inmates.
- Inmate win condition:
 - Complete all minigames in each sector, OR
 - Identify and defeat all Impersonators during Meetings.
- Imitator win condition:
 - Eliminate Inmates until there are as many Inmates as there are Imitators.



Basically, it was a square just like that. The numbers marked the rooms and the lines represented hallways leading from one room to another. It was designed so that players could switch the locations of rooms and hallways around to come up with new variations with each match. There were also a few smaller rooms scattered across the facility that weren't marked by numbers.

The large rooms that had numbers assigned to them were called "Sectors," with all of the players starting the game in the center of the facility, Sector 5. The minigames that filled the escape gauge were in every Sector *except* for 5, so everyone was effectively pushed to leave that room behind.

Strategy-wise, my impression as a beginner was that acting alone made you an easy target for the Imitators. Imitators could kill an Inmate instantly, but not repeatedly; the move required a thirty-second cooldown before it could be used again, so killing someone in a group would accomplish nothing but outing yourself as an Imitator. That meant it was safer to stick with others as you navigated the facility. But among other problems, sticking with too many people could stack avatars on top of each other and make it hard to discern who actually performed a kill, so moderation was key.

Everyone formed impromptu teams and scattered off in different directions. What would I do...? Ah, Hikari-chan was heading for Sector 1, so I decided to follow her. Oh, and Alice-chan was tagging along behind me, which made us a group of three.

: Wait, what?

: That sure was a mixture of something.

: "Modern-day," as though a name that chaotic existed in any other era

: Shuwa-chan, you're supposed to call yourself "the first" if you're the first generation.

: ain't nobody else taking on that name so she could cut it off no problem

: first time seeing someone put a number in their name

and still have name to spare

: lmao at the very specific level of stupidity that makes her think she can just throw anything in there.

: I mean, she came into this drunk, so you probably could have taken a hint?

: broke: introducing yourself, woke: insta-dooming yourself

“I felt a chill run down my spine for a sec because Alice would come for my ass whether she’s an Imitator or not, but hey, I’ve got Hikari-chan here so I’m sure I’ll be fine!”

The three of us made it to Sector 1, so we all went to start our minigames.

“Let’s see, this one went like this, aaaaand...done.”

They were all simple enough to end in seconds. My character looked so cute as she waddled across the room, making our whole situation seem pretty happy-go-lucky, but of course...

“A blackout...”

The facility’s lights suddenly went out, and my field of vision drastically shrank. This was one of the obstacles that the Imitators could throw in our way. The Imitators had connections with the staff operating the facility’s game, and by sending them a request, the staff could assist the Imitators with an obstacle. The lineup went something like this:

Every thirty seconds, they could perform a blackout like the one we were experiencing now. The Inmates had their fields of vision shrunk, but the Imitators could see just fine.

They could turn a minigame in a specified Sector into a “forced minigame”; if the Inmates didn’t complete it within thirty seconds, the facility would be inundated with a toxic gas that only harmed the Inmates, giving us an immediate Game Over.

They could use the teleportation machines installed in Sectors 1, 3, 7, and 9 to

instantaneously travel between those four sectors.

They could activate a Sector's door locks, also once every thirty seconds. This was mainly used to cut off an Inmate's escape route or to hinder mobility of the others.

Each obstacle type required a thirty-second cooldown in between uses, and those cooldowns were shared between the Imitators. The idea was that the Imitators would use these tricks with cunning to isolate Inmates and kill them without ever being noticed.

After we waffled around in the dark for a bit, the lights came back on. Which meant that it was about time for...

"Ooh, it's the thing!"

A message in an unnerving shade of red flashed on the screen: "Emergency Meeting." Finding a dead body and reporting it on the spot would begin a meeting automatically, meaning that someone must have pushed that button.

Of course, the facility didn't have any dead bodies to find before we came here. In other words, this signaled that someone had been killed.

The game temporarily took away control of my character and forcibly switched to a meeting-specific screen that displayed the names of all the participants. Meetings could begin from reports like this, or from someone pressing the assembly button that was located exclusively in Sector 5.

Now then, any participants who died had their names shown on the bottom of the screen, so you could tell what had happened at a glance. Our first victim was...

[Hareru Asagiri: Dead]

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey?!?!"

After my cry of abject shock, I hurriedly unmuted myself and joined the voice chat. Everyone was just as flustered as I was to see that the first victim's identity was so far out of left field.

This was the start of the meeting segment. Our time limit for it was two minutes. Within that time, we would have to identify who we believed to be an Imitator and vote them out. The player who amassed the most votes at the end would be expelled from the game, no matter which side they were really on. Alternatively, it was possible to skip a voting session if players weren't sure who the Imitator was; if the majority of players elected to skip voting, then nobody would be expelled at all.

All right, folks, the fun and exciting debate segment that werewolf games were known for was about to begin.

"Killing Hareru-senpai... You've crossed a line that even I, Shion-mama, cannot accept!"

"Were it not for Hareru-senpai, there would be no Live-On, and by extension no Awayuki-dono! This crime shall not go unpunished!"

"Nya-nya! This Imitator doesn't realize that they wouldn't even be here if it weren't for Hareru-senpai! Show yourself already! Come clean now and we might show ya some mercy!"

Wails of mourning arose from all sides at the death of such a respected figure.

"Uh... Why do you all think threats will get us anywhere? This is a werewolf game, remember?"

...It figured that Mashiron's knack for staying calm and pointing out the obvious was able to get all of us (myself included) to settle down.

Whoops, gotta focus here. This was a game about communication, so losing my cool would just help the Imitators win. Gotta get it together.

Wait, that gave me a great idea! I could drop a snappy one-liner to cool everyone else's heads too!

"You know, they call it a 'werewolf' game, but I guess Imitators can't wear their hearts on their wool!"

"....." everyone said.

Um...I said I wanted to cool their heads, not freeze them in their tracks.

"Hm? Sorry, Shuwa-chan, Hikari couldn't quite hear what you said! Something

about wool? Did you get a sweater? Requesting more details!”

“Stop it, Hikari-chan! Don’t pour salt on my wounds!”

“Worry not, mama. No matter what happens, you will always be Kaeru’s top-mommy.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I haven’t worried about that part for so much as a second of my life,” I consoled her. “If anything, feel free to take the opportunity to switch to literally anyone else.”

“Aaaaaah ha ha ha ha hah haaah!!! Awayuki-dono, I must commend you, for anything you say is the height of comedic art!”

“Look, I know it was my joke, but your standards are way too low here! What are you, a Bulldrome? Is your whole body a giant weak spot?”

“Gyeh keh keh keh keh! Awayuki-kun, you’s got a way with woyds!”

“Hold on, who was that?! This call shouldn’t have anyone but Live-On’s streamers in it, but I don’t remember anyone having that accent I just heard!”

“It’s me. You know, Sei-sama,” she said in her normal voice.

“Literally who.”

“Gyeh keh keh keh keh! Yer talkin’ to duh great Sei-sama!”

“Oh, it’s just you, Sei-sama. Your laugh is as bizarre and revolting as usual, I see.”

“Hm, does something not strike you as strange there, Awayuki-kun?”

Phew... I got stuck staving off a storm of stupidity for some reason... Wait, I was the reason.

“Umm... W-Well then, how about we start with where everyone was? First, who was it that found the body?”

Shion-mama took a moment to compose herself before taking charge. Well, at least we were getting on with the game...

“Nya-nya! It was me, Nekoma! I found her at the bottom of the map, in Sector 8!”

Sector 8, eh? That meant that anyone who'd headed straight down at the start of the game had a high chance of being an Imitator, right?

"Okay, so do we have anyone who headed down at the start?" Shion-mama reached the same conclusion I did and started rounding up suspects.

From what we could gather, we came up with four suspects: Mashiron, Ehrai-chan, Kaeru-chan, and the person who'd reported the murder, Nekoma-senpai. We had eyewitness testimony here, so there was plenty of reason to be suspicious of them. Knowing the cliché, the perpetrator had probably committed their crime during the blackout.

"Hey now, just wait one minute~!"

Just as we'd finished narrowing down our suspects, one of those very suspects raised her voice: Ehrai-chan.

"I think there was plenty of time to move around or head upward through a teleporter during the blackout! I think that the people who went upward should explain what they did too~!"

Well, now...Ehrai-chan raised a fair point. She was composed too; a reminder that her gentle tone of voice actually belied a razor-sharp mind. If any of our witnesses revealed someone to have visited both the top and bottom of the map, that would warrant plenty of suspicion.

Nobody objected to Ehrai-chan's logic, so the rest of the players gave their reports, starting with Shion-mama.

"Sei and I went to Sector 3! Teehee, I just felt like tagging along."

"What a coincidence, I felt like tagging along with you as well, Shion."

"Huh, you did?! Teehee, I guess we both thought the same thing."

"Well, I suppose that's natural. We're in love, after all."

"Tee hee hee hee hee..." they both tittered.

Yeah... I think I knew who I wanted dead first.

"Listen up, everyone, I just came up with a flawless deduction. These two are girlfriend-havers, so they're the Imitators."

“Nya-nya! You’re brilliant, Shuwa-chan! Your deduction is so airtight that Nekoma cannot imagine a single objection!”

“Shuwa-chan-senpai, you’ve done it again~! Being a girlfriend-haver is basically like being a murderer, so we should expel these two right now!”

“P-Please stop, you all! Don’t start voting! I’m sorry about the flirting! If nothing else, I’m not an Imitator! I’m everyone’s mama!”

“Well, ain’t you’s lookin’ jealous!”

I thought I’d heard second gen’s Henchman McCackle over there say something, but I’d be sure to regret it if I made any more wisecracks, so I kept the meeting moving.



“Er, next is Hikari, right? Hikari went along with Shuwa-chan and Alice-chan to Sector 1!”

“Yep, and we stuck together even after the lights came back on,” I confirmed.

“I was guarding Awayuki-dono from the rear!”

I figured the odds that one of us was the Imitator were low since we’d stuck together from start to finish, but...

“Teehee, everyone was lined up all buddy-buddy behind Hikari! It was like, what was it called, that thing you did on field days! Uhhh, centipede...centipede... Oh, yeah! A human centipede!”

“A human centipede?!” we shouted, everyone in the call losing their cool all over again.

“Hm? What’s wrong, everyone?”

“H-Hikari-kun? You say that the three of you were doing a human centipede?”

“We sure were, Sei-sama! Hikari and Shuwa-chan and Alice-chan were stuck from front to back for the whole trip!”

“And this was merely being ‘buddy-buddy’ to you, you say?”

“Yes? Why wouldn’t it? Did you not do any human centipedes during your field days at school?”

“Hm. Hikari-kun, I believe there might be an abnormally high probability that the school you attended had a hypnotist in its ranks. Did you notice any protagonist-like nondescript men whose eyes were hidden by unusually long bangs?”

“Heh heh heh, not bad, Sei-sama! Impressive of you to realize that Hikari was capable of even hypnosis!”

“Hikari-kun... To think your true identity was a monster who’d abuse her hypnosis skills during a field day to create a human centipede... Please, make me your apprentice.”

“Hikari would be happy to test it on you too, Sei-sama!”

“Oh no, letting my desires slip has made her see me as an enemy. Time to flee

the country. I'll get my double bass case."

"Hikari's real good at it too! Nobody back in school could see through Hikari's playing-card magic tricks!"

"So... Who else thinks it's Sei's fault for getting the wrong idea?" Seeming to accept the futility in asking Hikari any further, Shion-mama brought her questioning to Alice and me. "You two. Do you have anything you'd like to say?"

"If it meant being connected with Awayuki-dono, I would gladly be made into a centipede!"

"You're unnervingly flexible on the format when it comes to connecting with me, huh, Alice-chan? You work over USB or something? For my part, I'd rather avoid getting centipeded."

Why? Why had following this game's optimal strategy of sticking to a group earned me such cold stares?!

"Ah, Hikari made a mistake! It wasn't a human centipede, it was a centipede race! Where did that human centipede talk even come from? Either way, sorry!"

"....."

Everyone was probably baffled at how someone could make a mistake like that, but since anything was possible with Hikari, they could only stay silent.

Oh, and for any readers curious about that "human centipede" business, don't look it up unless you have a heart (and stomach) of steel...

The meeting continued, but given that it was our first meeting investigating a murder that had happened in the dark, we didn't have enough to go on to identify an Imitator.

"Oh, shoot! We're out of time!"

Shion-mama got hasty when she remembered the time. I checked to find that there were only fifteen seconds left.

"So we're fine with the upper map, right? Everyone reported, right?!" she fretted.

“Don’t worry, you’re fine~! Thanks for your report!”

Yep, for now, it sounded like we had everyone’s reports. Nobody thought that the Inmates from the upper map had done anything suspicious...but this game had *two* Imitators, and that made things tricky. Our discussion could have had some high-level teamwork leading us around, and the thought of that made it dangerous to take it all at face value.

“Okay, so be suspicious of the four who went to the bottom, that’s all for now!”

Shion-mama’s quick and barely comprehensible speech closed the curtains on this meeting. No players were expelled.

The game returned control of my character. There were still a lot of mysteries left under wraps, so for now, I decided to follow Shion-mama’s parting conclusion...

: Oh it's getting real now.

: Killing Harerun first is huge.

: Incidentally, Harerun's screaming and slamming her desk right about now.

: What a depressing twist

: Oh, and now she started making a straw effigy of her killer. Except with wool since she doesn't have any straw.

: I don't think cursing people works like that in Japan, so isn't she just...making a doll?

Some time had passed since the close of the first meeting, and for now, the game was moving along rather peacefully. There were a few cases of fellow Inmates being isolated by Imitator obstacles, but for the most part, Hikari-chan, Alice-chan, and I stuck together as we completed our tasks. So far, our team had avoided any casualties.

The escape gauge was filling up at a steady pace, so I started to wonder if we’d end up filling it entirely before getting wiped out. But the moment that

thought crossed my mind, those red letters that spelled “Emergency Meeting” flashed across my monitor once again. The game switched to a meeting screen, signaling that the next discussion was about to begin.

As for this round’s victims...

[Kaeru Yamatani: Dead]

[Nekoma Hirune: Dead]

It was those two...

“I see... We took a pretty big hit.” Mashiron’s voice now carried a bit more tension than it had during the first meeting.

To our eyes, this game had been practically a leisurely stroll around the facility, but behind our backs, *two* Inmates had been murdered in secret; I knew it was just a game, but it still sent a shiver down my spine.

“I... I can’t do this anymore! Sei-sama’s outta here!”

“I can’t say I don’t understand the sentiment, Sei-sama, but could you refrain from saying things that would guarantee your imminent death?” Mashiron said.

“Can it! Come now, Shion, let us flee the country together!”

“Sei... Teehee, that almost sounds like a honeymoon! But how would we do that from here?”

“Why, what better way to flee a country than in a double bass case?”

“Oh my, we’re taking the super economy class! But it doesn’t sound half bad if I’m with you, Sei.”

“Sei-sama, you do know that there are other forms of transit than gig bags, don’t you? Don’t be a penny-pincher over your big day. And Shion-senpai, could you take the rose-colored glasses off? Our group might be smaller, but there’s still a limit to what I can do alone to keep these knuckleheads in line.”

I swear, this Down-Bad Duo... As if Mashiron needed *more* help getting headaches. But if it came to this, then so be it. I, Shuwa-chan, would step in and

offer relief to Mashiron's comedy.

"Hey, hey, Mashiron."

"Hm? What is it, Shuwa-chan?"

"I don't want those two to outdo us, so I nabbed us a violin case. Let's have a getaway to Okinotori-shima."

"Setting new standards for stupidity. Have you *seen* a violin before? You know, the musical instrument? A whole person is not going to fit into a case for that. And would it have killed you to pick a place with solid land?"

"Hey, hey, Awayuki-dono."

"Hm? Why, what could it be, Alice-chan?"

"I'd like to see you happy, so I nabbed a Carlos-chan to go with your proposal!"

"Hey."

"What might it be, Mashiro-dono?"

"So, Alice-chan. I'm sure there are a lot of Carlos-chans in the world, but uh, don't you think it's a little dicey to bring your guy up in this context? Where'd you even buy him?"

"Mercari, ma'am!"

"I'm surprised to hear he's being sold in broad daylight. Could your Carlos-chan perhaps be a different Carlos-chan than the one I have in mind?"

"The box said he was shipped from Lebanon!"

"That settles it. I'm gonna say there's a ninety-nine percent chance that we have the same Carlos-chan in mind. Every newspaper is gonna have 'Welcome home, Carlos-chan!' plastered on the front page. Anyway, Shuwa-chan, that's enough sitting back, now say something to that kouhai of yours already!"

"C***** G*****."

"No no no no absolutely *not*! Why did you just say the whole thing straight?! That's *way* past the line! Augh, I can't go on, I'm calling it quits on the quips..."

Phew. An eloquent display of levelheaded logic, if I did say so myself. If anything, one could argue my work was *too* eloquent and *too* logical.

“Are you okay, Mashiro-chan? You tired?”

“Ah, Hikari-chan... You’re the only ray of hope I can still rely on.”

“Ooh! If you say so, then Hikari’s gonna work extra hard! Worry not, Mashiro-chan, for Hikari will take on your sacred role of comedic comebacks!”

“You will? Really?”

“Do ho ho! Fear not, Hikari will handle it! Hikari’s comedic brilliance will leave you speechless!”

“Thank you, Hikari-chan... In that case, I’ll take Shion’s place and try to lead the discussion, okay? All right, everyone, back to the meeting—”

“What’s the deal with that?!”

“...”

“Whatcha think, Mashiro-chan? Wasn’t Hikari’s rib just riveting? Huh? Mashiro-chan? Heeey!”

Apparently realizing how dire our situation was now that Mashiron was down for the count, Shion-mama finally came back to reality from her trip on cloud nine. “Er, *ahem*! Everyone, stay calm! It’s clear that both Imitators are still alive and well. If we don’t start working out who they are, we’ll lose! We need to expel someone!”

“You make a fine point, indeed. I would like to deliver a victory to Awayuki-dono, after all... For our part, Awayuki-dono, Hikari-dono, and I were stuck together for the entire duration, leaving no opening for an Imitator to intervene. We traveled upward from the start, so I believe we can presume ourselves innocent.”

“Hm, I see... On that note, the two Inmates who were killed this time both traveled downward at the start,” Shion-mama began to say.

“Ooh, me, me! I think Ehrai-chan’s suspicious!” I interrupted to shout the name of the player I had my eyes on the most. In retrospect, her actions at the start and the way she’d tried to throw people off her trail during the last

meeting made it hard to look at her with anything *but* suspicion.

“Hmm, I don’t know about that...”

“But why, Shion-mama?! She’s the most suspicious one here, isn’t she?!”

“You see, Sei-sama and I kept an eye on her, since we also had our doubts, but she didn’t do anything out of the ordinary. If anything, she was cooperative.”

“Sh-She was?”

“Indeed, I, Sei-sama, can attest to it as well. I molested her with my eyes over her every move, but not one nook or cranny struck me as strange. Succulent, though, I must admit.”

“The dating duo senpais are right, promise~! The only reason I cast suspicion on the people in the top end of the map in the first meeting was because I didn’t want us to jump to conclusions! I’m an Inmate here~!”

“Hmmm... It’s hard to say that Ehrai-chan’s completely in the clear, but my Shion-mama verdict is that there’s not enough to go on to expel her right this second.”

Guh... It looked like I’d be going nowhere if I pushed the issue. I really thought I had something there too...

Huh? Wait, if the suspect had to be someone other than Ehrai-chan, then that left...

“Is... Is it Mashiron?”

That was the only choice remaining...

“Okay, now hold it, I can understand why you’d doubt me after all that. But you’re wrong, I’m really not it. Yes, I thought Ehrai-chan was the Imitator, so I kept my distance by sticking with Nekoma-senpai and Kaeru-chan, but we got separated because of the forced minigame and the door locks, and I was all alone before I knew it.”

“Hmm... I’d really love to believe anything my dear Mashiron says, but at this point...”

“I’m telling the truth, Shuwa-chan! Besides, it’s still plenty possible that the lovebirds there killed Hareru-senpai at the start. Come to think of it, I caught a glimpse of Shion-senpai and Ehrai-chan together, but Sei-sama wasn’t with them, right? What was she doing?”

“I was doing a minigame in the next room. It was looking like we’d win by filling the gauge, after all.”

“Gauge aside, we also met up with Sei right after that! I think Sei’s an Inmate!” Shion-mama argued.

“That’s right, really! What’s more, if they were the Imitators, I would’ve been dead long ago, really! We should expel Mashiro-senpai here! She’s simply too suspicious~!”

“That...could just mean that only one of you three was an Imitator...” Though she tried to defend herself, Mashiron’s voice grew more and more faint.

At this rate...our first expulsion was about to be Mashiron. I felt bad for her, but those were the rules of the game. It was with a heavy heart that I reached for the vote button, but just then...

“Mrgh... Hikari’s just getting more and more confused... Hey, Chami-chan, what do you think?”

The moment Hikari-chan stepped back into the conversation to say that, time froze for everyone in the meeting.

Chami...chan?

: ?!

: Does this mean...

: The tables just turned.

: Harerun update: she's having a good time with her knitting.

: Yeah, unlike other werewolf games, this one doesn't give dead inmates anything to do...

: meanwhile, dead imitators can still call in obstacles...

“Wha?! Uh, how?! How could you see through my Stealth Mode?!”

During that pause of pin-drop silence, we heard Chami-chan’s voice for the first time since her self-introduction at the start of the collab.

Yes, *since her introduction*. I wracked my brain, but I couldn’t find any recollection of her saying a single word during this entire first round. Chami-chan had completely concealed her presence...but why? Why had Chami-chan said nothing before? And why hadn’t any of us noticed?

“What’s up, Chami-chan? You’re getting all panicky.”

“H-Hikari-chan... How long...have you been able to see me?”

“Hm? From the start, of course! Hikari was kinda worried if you’d be okay since you’re not great at talking, but you’ve been so silent that Hikari wanted to throw you a lifeline! Heh heh!”

“You mean...this whole time...” Chami-chan trailed off.

Stealth Mode.



Chami-chan was absolutely dumbfounded. No, not just Chami-chan; everyone besides Hikari-chan was visibly stunned.

This meant...that ever since the first meeting, not a single one of us besides Hikari-chan had managed to perceive Chami-chan's presence.

In other words, all of our theories until now had just been flipped upside-down.

"A-Anybody?! Did anybody here see Chami-chan?! Not even right now, just at any point during this game! Does anyone have any idea what Chami-chan's been up to?"

Shion-mama frantically raised her voice, but she didn't receive a single response.

How does that even happen? I could understand nobody hearing her voice, but nobody even *seeing* her? In a game like this? "Wh-What about you, Hikari-chan?!" I asked.

"Hmm... Hikari thinks she saw her run off somewhere after the game started, but after that, Hikari's got no idea..."

"But that's... What in the world is going on..." I muttered.

Even Hikari-chan, the one person who'd noticed Chami-chan's existence, hadn't seen her...since the start of the game?

"Ah!" At that moment, I remembered a particular talent that Chami-chan possessed.

You see, Chami-chan was as shy as shy got. She wanted to avoid contact if at all possible with people she wasn't familiar with, and one day, this burning desire had awakened into what could almost be described as a superpower.

I'd first caught a glimpse of this power when we went to the amusement park together. Back then, Chami-chan showed an acute sensitivity to anyone who gave off the slightest impression of being an extrovert, and she dexterously maneuvered around them as we walked the park.

Chami-chan herself only became aware of her power while streaming a horror game one day. I'd watched the archive of that one myself; her viewers were

expecting a goofy stream of shrieks and fails, but she played through it with a level of speed and efficiency far beyond what you'd expect from a first-time player and barely met any enemies along the way.

The viewers—and of course, Chami-chan—were baffled at what was going on, but at some point, they realized the truth: in order to cope with her ever-escalating shyness, Chami-chan had sharpened her senses to their limits and gained the ability to sense people's locations in both the real world and in games!

Now that we were playing a werewolf game...could Chami-chan have used this ability to avoid not just making a team, but seeing a soul altogether? The possibility was definitely there, so I quickly explained these circumstances to the others.

"Wait, that is one *depressing* power. Sei-sama might just cry."

"Chami-chan, that's so cool! Hikari wants a power like that!"

"Hikari-chan, you're the last person who could pull it off..."

"Huh?! Why's that, Shion-mama?!"

"Because, dear, light can have no fellowship with darkness..."

"Have you people no souls?!" Alice-chan exclaimed.

Everyone was clamoring to get a word in edgewise, but suddenly, Mashiron broke her silence to start laughing.

"Ha ha ha ha..."

"What's up, Mashiron? You piss yourself?"

"Shuwa-chan, how is that the first conclusion your brain reaches? You're ruining the mood."

"Well, you normally go hot and heavy with me over every little thing, but you didn't have a single quip about Chami-chan's mind-blowing secret getting revealed..."

"What, do you think I'm constantly pissing myself when I'm not calling someone an idiot? Sounds like I'd have to be joined at the hip with you if I

didn't want a rough life."

"Does that mean...you want to be proposed to? You want me to say I'll protect your panties, in sickness and in health?"

"A proposal like that might actually make me piss myself out of shock."

"Hahh, hahhh, huff, hahhhh..."

"Also, Shion-senpai, could I ask you to refrain from the obvious panting? I can hold it in."

"Tch, I thought I was gonna get to see that hard-ass Mashiro-chan revert to infancy..."

"All right, let's get a move on already. First, I'd like to give a thumbs-up to Hikari-chan and Shuwa-chan; you helped me put the pieces together. Now then, Chami-chan, let's have us a little chat."

"Eeeeeek?!"

With that, Mashiron began mercilessly grilling Chami-chan. Mashiron hadn't totally shaken off everyone else's suspicions, but we were more curious about what Chami-chan had to say, so we stayed quiet and let it play out.

"Why did you zip those lips so tight? Also, mind explaining that 'stealth mode' thing?"

"Er... You know! Because I can't talk when I'm in a crowd, right? I always miss my timing or talk over someone..."

"I see. In that case, we'll talk it out one-on-one. So, where did you go at the start?"

"I-I went to Sector 6, and then I went up from there."

"Was anyone with you?"

"No..."

"Interesting. Going up from Sector 6 meant you went to Sector 3, where Seisama and Shion-senpai were. Did you not come across them?"

"Ah... Well, our senpais were working through Sector 3's minigames, so I figured I'd go to a different Sector, but then I got lost in the hallways..."

“All on your own?”

“Y-Yeah, I did.”

“Now I just find that suspicious.”

“Wh-Why’s that?!”

Chami-chan was clearly failing to hide her panic, but Mashiron kept a poker face as she cut off Chami-chan’s escape routes one by one.

“Acting alone in this game makes you an easy target for the Imitator, and surviving alone makes people wonder if you *are* the Imitator. If an Inmate were in your situation, wouldn’t they typically meet up with other allies? If nothing else, avoiding them altogether is a red flag. I understand you’re shy, but there’s no need to talk in this game outside of the meeting segments, so if you’re avoiding people...then perhaps you had a reason for not wanting to be seen?”

“O-Oh, how naive you are, Mashiro-chan! You sorely underestimate my shyness! Even without the fear of conversation, simply being seen is enough to terrify me to my core!”

“Hmm... Well, fair enough. So what were you doing until this meeting?”

“I was...in Sector 1.”

“What route did you take to get there?”

“Uhh... I believe I went from Sector 8 to 5, then 4, and then 1.”

“Well, now... I was the one who found and reported the body for this meeting, you know. Nekoma-senpai and I were in a group until a door lock split us up. I rushed to her as fast as I could, but she was dead by the time I got there. If I recall, it was Sector 4 where I found and reported that body, so if you went through there, why didn’t you report the body? It had been a while since the last blackout, but did you happen to not see it?”

“S-Slow down, please~!”

Just when the suspicion was about to shift decidedly onto Chami-chan, Ehrai-chan suddenly interjected.

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea to believe everything Chami-senpai says~!”

“And why is that?” It was a spur-of-the-moment pivot, but Mashiron’s stone face stayed firm.

“Because Chami-chan’s a dummy~!!!”

“Ehrai-chan?!”

Hearing such a curveball from her own junior made Chami-chan yelp in surprise and shock. However, none of the other players present shared her reaction. After all, it wasn’t exactly wrong...

“I see, Ehrai-chan, certainly an astute observation. Chami-chan is indeed a dummy.”

“So even you’re calling me a dummy, huh, Mashiro-chan...”

Chami-chan was slowly shrinking back, but in exchange, the discussion between Mashiron and Ehrai-chan was about to kick off.

“I mean, really now! If Chami-senpai were the Imitator, I don’t believe there’s any way she could have gone this long without being found out~! She almost certainly would have slipped up!”

“Hmm, yes, I understand. Your thinking makes a lot of sense here, Ehrai-chan.”

“Good, so that means—”

“That means that from the start, Chami-chan must have had a partner kind enough to provide the support she needed to focus solely on killing, don’t you agree?”

“.....”

“Don’t you agree, Ehrai-chan?”

Wait a minute, did Ehrai-chan just dig in her own hole? Uh, I mean, dig her own grave?

“Come to think of it, Ehrai-chan, back when Shion-mama asked if everyone had reported their locations during the first meeting, you said we all had pretty quickly, even though Chami-chan most certainly hadn’t—is that right? What a coincidence! It’s almost like you were *covering* for Chami-chan, isn’t it?”

“Not at all, really! I honestly just didn’t notice back then... And hey now, Mashiro-senpai, you didn’t notice either! And while you might sound like you’re on the Inmate side, don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’ve been trying to lead the group into expelling someone right after you found a body yourself! It’s suspicious!”

“Even though Chami-chan walked right past a body earlier?”

“That could have just been because the body wasn’t there yet! It’s quite possible that you killed Nekoma-senpai and reported the body yourself to thin out our numbers with a meeting!”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right! There wasn’t a body in Sector 4 when I went there!”

Hmm, so Chami-chan was jumping on the bandwagon of Ehrai-chan’s counterattack, eh?

“And besides, we already know that I was with Shion-senpai and Sei-sama the whole time, so if I *were* an Imitator, I couldn’t have possibly pulled anything off~! Right, my second-gen senpais?!”

“Hmm... Whatcha think, Shion?”

“Well... Ehrai-chan’s definitely suspicious, but it didn’t feel like she did anything of the sort.”

Oh? Were the tables turning again?

“I see. I have to say, Ehrai-chan, you’re a sharp one,” Mashiron said.

“This wannabe-detective senpai is still going on?! You really ought to know when to give up!”

“But that sharp mind of yours turned my suspicions into certainty. Ehrai-chan, you really are an Imitator.”

There had been a moment before when the tides were turning that way...but Mashiron was taking *this* moment to declare her victory.

“First off, it’s incredibly likely that you were behind the murder of the very first victim, Hareru-senpai.”

“Wh-Why is that?!” Ehrai-chan squeaked.

“There’s no doubt that Hareru-senpai’s good at this game. No matter how hard Chami-chan committed to silence, Hareru-senpai would probably see right through her. On her own, Chami-chan would probably fail to notice that and get herself killed in no time flat. That’s why you were compelled to dispose of your greatest threat first, no matter how much suspicion it would throw your way. The problem was what came after. I can’t imagine you knew the true extent of Chami-chan’s ability, so you chose to cleanly split your roles to ensure she wouldn’t be noticed; one side handles the talking and obstacles, the other focuses on killing. It would have been risky to take action right after casting the suspicion of Hareru-senpai’s murder on yourself, and you’d have no chance of winning if Chami-chan were the sole survivor. After all, the fewer people remained, the likelier it’d become that someone would notice her.”

“Mashiro-senpai, I believe you might be overthinking this... I’m not smart enough to come up with all that...”

“Am I? Look at the situation here. If Chami-chan had gone unnoticed and I’d been expelled, we’d be spread too thin for your suspicion to matter, so you could get away with taking kills again. If you met back up with Chami-chan, you’d win by your second double kill. Well, underestimating Hikari-chan put you on the ropes, but still.”

“Heh heh!” Hikari-chan chuckled smugly. She might have been a bit of an airhead, but at the same time, she had a particular talent of her own.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is this: Ehrai-chan’s play was to completely baby Chami-chan!”

“Her play was to completely baby Chami-chan?!” we all shouted.

“Heh heh heh,” Chami-chan chuckled. “I started with ageplay, and now I’m getting humiliation play. Mashiro-chan, I hope you’re prepared to be *punished* later.”

“Huh? What am I getting roped into?”

“The next time we meet, I’m making you speak into my ear the whole time! Awwww yeah, that androgynous, boyish voice, I can’t get enooooough, oooohyooooo!!!”

“I’ve had enough.”

“Hey, hey, Chami-chan! What about me?” I interrupted.

“Awwwww yeah, that limp, smelly, and brain-dead voice of an alcoholic deadbeat, I can’t get enooooooooough!!!”

“Mashiron, I’m expelling pussy-for-ears here.”

“Stay calm, Shuwa-chan. That’s probably Chami-chan’s idea of a compliment. Just, you know, a bit too honest of one.”

“Hmph! My breath is *not* smelly! It’s lavender-scented!”

“So are some toilets.”

“My mistake. I meant StroZero-scented!”

“You could have just taken the easy way out and said ‘lemon’... I mean, yeah, it probably *is* StroZero-scented anyway... Wait. What flavor did you say you were drinking tonight?”

“All of ‘em at once, woohoo!”

“Definitely smelly.”

“I-It’s not smelly! There’s a part of this that’s basically fruits au lait! Even if the actual flavor has me thinkin’, ‘Fruits? No way!’”

“Settle down already.”

“Oh, oh, and also, I totally take care of my breath, okay? I practically live off of Frisk mints, okay? You think I start off my meals with a scoop of white rice, but no, that’s a heapin’ helpin’ of Frisks!”

“Where are you getting enough mints to do that?”

“*That’s* your first reaction here?!”

For the record, I really was taking care of my breath, okay?! I still have some semblance of a fashionable young lady within me, okay?!

“Oh, shoot, we’re short on time.” I was enjoying my banter with Mashiron, but we had other priorities here. The time for our meeting was almost up!

“All right, we should expel someone here,” Mashiron declared. “At least

either Chami-chan or Ehrai-chan, if nobody else. If that doesn't end the game there, then feel free to expel me with no mercy. Expelling me after one of them would be fine too. I'm positive we'll win this way. But right now, we absolutely can't let Chami-chan and Ehrai-chan live."

The rest of the meeting fell silent. When Mashiron finished speaking, she put in a vote for Chami-chan.

Hmm... Yeah, my mind was made up too. It was time to put in my vote. My choice...was Chami-chan.

"But nooooooooo..."

Following her pained wail came the following message on our screens:

[Chami Yanagase: Dead]

The other players must have focused their votes on Chami-chan. She was as suspicious as you could possibly get, so I couldn't blame them...

With the meeting over, we regained control of our characters as they reappeared in Sector 5. That said...this game was pretty much settled, huh? After all, the last Imitator had to be Ehrai-chan. Mashiron's reasoning was one thing, but covering for Chami-chan was a fatal mistake. It was like admitting she was her accomplice. If Ehrai-chan wanted to survive, then she should have cut Chami-chan off completely back there. It might have been cruel, but this was a game where deception was the key to victory. Instead, Ehrai-chan was going to be marked for the rest of the game. Or, wait, I knew that there was a cooldown before the assembly button could be pressed again right after a meeting, but maybe we'd be better off pressing it as soon as possible and expelling her on the spot? I weighed our options...until the unthinkable happened.

The moment we could all move again, Ehrai-chan ran right up to Mashiron with zero hesitation. And then, with the eyes of every surviving Inmate watching...she murdered her.

[Mashiro Irodori: Dead]

“Whaaaaaaaaaaa?!?!” we all yelled.

I didn’t know who pressed the Report button, but my screen went right back to the meeting menu.

“Uuuuurghh... That wush for Chami-senpaiiiiiiiiiigh!!!”

The whole call was stunned. Ehrai-chan was...crying?!

“Fwah ha ha ha hah! Ya see that, Chami-senpai! I got ’em for ya! You can rest easy knowin’ ya won’t be alone up there!”

D-Don’t tell me—! This wasn’t Ehrai-chan the zookeeper, this was Ehrai-chan the mob boss! But why was she coming out *now*?!

Shion-mama was still reeling from shock, but she managed to form a question for the mob boss out of sheer grit as the host. “E-E-E-E-Ehrai-chan?! What’s gotten into you?! Were you always this close with Chami-chan?!”

“Nah, this was my first rodeo with Chami-senpai. She ain’t much for collabs either. But ya know what? That don’t mean squat! The past don’t matter. When we swear an oath in blood, we’re brothers! We’re family, ready to put our lives on the line for each other! Waaaaaaugh!!!!!”

This girl sure had a strong sense of obligation. *Guess that’s the heart of a mob boss.*

“C-C-C-Calm down, Boss! What’s takin’ out a hit gonna solve?! Ain’t you got the Ehrai Family on your shoulders?”

“No, see, she’s not a ‘boss,’ she’s a zookeeper, remember? And how are you adapting to this so quick, Shuwa-chan?”

“Shion-mama, I was right there when Ehrai-chan’s hidden crime-boss persona came into the world, so I’m used to it.”

I remembered that time we’d played the horror game together. Thinking back, the shock that had hit me might’ve been the same sort of thing that had hit everyone else when Awa had first turned into Shuwa.

“Chami-senpai, y’see, she was a good kid... A dim one, though!” Ehrai-chan

went on.

“Very dim,” we all agreed.

I could imagine an emotional Chami-chan shedding tears up in Heaven right about now. Don’t ask what those emotions were.

But still, I finally understood why Ehrai-chan had covered for Chami-chan earlier. At a glance, you’d think someone as quick-witted as Ehrai-chan would know to cut her off, but she actually treasured her partners too dearly to even consider it...

“Ehrai-chan, you’re so cool! Hikari will follow you for life!”

“Yes, Ehrai-dono, your passion for your comrades is commendable indeed. It makes me proud to consider myself your genmate!”

Look at that, will ya? Even in the jaws of defeat, her raw charisma has two people about to defect to her side! All right, who’s the wise guy who called her a zookeeper, huh?! This ain’t that sorta game, capisce?!

“Oh... Now that I think about it,” Ehrai-chan said, “Chami-chan was killed by vote, so that means I can’t avenge her with Mashiro-senpai alone, right?”

Uh-oh.

“Awright youse sons o’ bitches, I’m aboutta *** this knife in all yer ****s and *** out yer **** before I ***** it, so get ready!”

“Oh no! It’s a Live-Ooooooooooon!”

“Sei-sama, don’t start sounding like a Wing grunt on me. Come now, Hikari-chan, Alice-chan, back to the game.”

“You needn’t worry, Awayuki-dono. I would be more than happy to take out a hit for your sake.”

“You might not have shaken off the influence yet.”

“Guh! For as cool as Ehrai-chan is, Hikari can’t overlook how she killed Hikari’s genmate, Mashiron. Hikari’s sanity has returned!”

“You sure it’s returned? You won’t double-double-cross our party like that one dragoon did? Then again, hey, it’s not like we’re losing with these

numbers.” I’d almost forgotten that we were still in Amidst Us’s meeting segment. Now that we’d clearly identified the Imitator, we had to expel them. *Say your prayers, Ehrai-chan!*

“Oh, five on one, eh? Almost sounds like a fair fight. Too bad they don’t teach you punks enough manners to say what damn turfs you’re from, you hear meeeee?!”

“Er, I think we share the same turf as you, Ehrai-kun...”

“We’re looking at internal strife! The seat of the next Boss will belong to Hikari!”

W-Well, hey, no big deal. Our win is guaranteed, so let’s close the curtains on game one!

“So, this is what it’s like to be against the world... Well, I ain’t givin’ in! I’ll avenge Chami-senpai right here, right now! Behold, my ultimate technique, M**key M**se Impression! Ha ha! I’m sending you to the mines under the Land of Dreams!”

“Whooooooooooooa anything but thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!!!!” we all screamed.

[Ehrai Sonokaze: Dead]

[Inmate Side: Win]

Everyone focused their votes on Ehrai-chan to avoid the deadliest suicide attack we’d ever heard. With the Imitators all defeated, it was a victory for the Inmates.

G-Gotta say, though, no surprise to see the mastermind of the underworld nearly succeed at turning a guaranteed loss into a draw... You can’t let your guard down until the last moment...

: Nice job!

: I've never seen a werewolf game like this... Wait, was it even a werewolf game by the end?

: I thought I was watching a werewolf game, but then it turned into a yakuza movie

: love the boss stg

: The boss Ehrai pulls out a desperate suicide attack over the loss of her poor, country-born little brother

: what's a senpai? beats me

: Harerun finally finished her doll and uploaded a single pic. Right next to it was a life-sized Kazuma Kiryu.

: Huh?

: The woman who defies all expectations.

: don't treat expectations like an obstacle course

Now it was time to meet up with everyone who'd been killed and chat about the game while waiting for the next round. It's always exciting to see the answers for the remaining mysteries, so this part of werewolf games is plenty fun too!

"Good game!" we all congratulated each other.

The first person to speak once we'd settled down was Hareru-senpai. "Hey, Bosslady over there, you got somethin' to say tuh me?!"

"My oh my, whomever could you mean by that~?"

"You, ya pinhead! Or what, should I be callin' ya 'Matriarch of the Ehrai Family' instead?"

"Oh, stop, Live-On doesn't have any streamers like that~!"

"Why you... Don't go playin' dumb on me! You went to kill me with so little hesitation that I, an actual genius, had no chance to escape!"

"Come now, I *ooonly* targeted you because you just *haaappened* to catch my eye~"

"Oh, right. Bosslady, do you need a life-size Kazuma Kiryu doll?"

“Who d’ya need a hit on? Or is it cash yer after?”

“Man, Bosslady, that sheep’s clothing has gotten paper-thin these days. I’ll give it to you for free...”

So it really was Ehrai-chan who’d killed Hareru-senpai. Still, that’s a boss of the underworld for you. When she decides to kill, she doesn’t have a second thought.

“I got shook the moment Chami-chan showed up on my screen...”

“Kaeru almost wet herself. In fact, knowing Kaeru had a chance to legally wet herself in front of a big audience like a baby makes her regret her accidental self-control.”

The next voices came from the second round of victims, Nekoma-senpai and Kaeru-chan. If Chami-chan had killed the both of them...then that meant Mashiron’s theories had been right about the whole thing. Impressive...

“Wow, Mashiro-chan! Seems like you were the MVP for this round!”

“No, it wasn’t just me, Shion-senpai. If Hikari-chan and Shuwa-chan weren’t here, we might have lost.”

“Ooh! Because you figured out the mystery thanks to Shuwa-chan’s advice and Hikari-chan’s particular sense of perspective that let her notice her genmate! In other words, you could say that the game was won thanks to the bonds of the third gen! Give a big hand to our third gen, everyone!”

With Shion-mama’s summary of the round finished, we were met with uproarious applause. Deh heh, they were makin’ me blush...

When the applause began to die down, I started to get myself back in the zone for the upcoming second round. Until...

“H-Hey, uh, Ehrai-chan!”

Chami-chan, a girl who always shrinks back in front of any crowd, loudly called out the name of her former Imitator teammate.

“Hm? What is it? Ah, I apologize for not being able to win it for us... I think I could have kept going if I’d kept my cool, but, well...”

“N-No, that was fine! In fact, it was, um, actually super cool!”

“Was it now? Well, if you’re happy, I’m happy~”

“Yeah, so, um, anyway, uhhh...”

“Pardon?”

“Do you...wanna stream together sometime?”

“Oh? My, but doesn’t that sound like an invitation to collab?”

“Y-Yeah, it’s that! Would you like to come to my house for it? I mean, Ehrai-chan, you’ve never done ASMR or anything before, right? I’m sure your viewers would love it! I’ll teach you a bunch of stuff, so, wanna come try it together?”

This...was unexpected.

Chami-chan, the same Chami-chan who was called the most hardened introvert in Live-On, had taken the initiative...in front of a huge crowd...and invited a non-genmate to her house for an off-collab?!

Her voice might have been shaking, but she’d definitely said it! She’d summoned all of her courage! And taken her first step toward building a human relationship all on her own!

“O-Of course I will~! My, a collab with Chami-senpai sounds ever so exciting~!!!”

“Really?! Phuh-yew, thank goodness... Okay, I’ll send you a message about it later.”

“Understood, of course!”

Ehrai-chan accepted with glee. *Give me a sec, I think I got something in my eye...*

It looked like they’d struck a chord in everyone else’s hearts too, as a round of applause naturally came for the Imitator team. *Ah, so warm... What a warm place Live-On is...*

Seeing how rare pairings interacted or witnessing the birth of whole new dynamic duos was one of the great things about these large-scale collabs!



: Huh? Are these...tears?

: teetee

: my body is ready

: 888888

: ¥8888

After we sat with the warm fuzzies for a bit, the screen went dark; we were finally heading into the second round.

Just like the first round, I was once again an Inmate. The Imitators slowly whittled our numbers down, and we expelled them in return. Soon, it was down to me, Nekoma-senpai, and Kaeru-chan in one final meeting, where we were able to pinpoint Kaeru-chan as the final Imitator.

(Incidentally, given how the first round had gone, Hareru-senpai immediately joined a group of three this time and formed a highly secure four-man formation. Or so it might have looked, but two of those people were Imitators who soon scored a double kill. Out in the first round yet again. *How...?*)

“Nya nya! There’s nowhere to run, Kaeru-chan!”

“Heh heh, it figures that Mama and Nekoma-senpai could push Kaeru into a corner. Sadly, while it pains me to put a damper on your guaranteed victory, this game still isn’t over.”

“Nya nya?! What do you mean?!”

“Heh heh heh. I have the backing of a massive organization.”

“A massive organization? N-No, Kaeru-chan, it can’t be! You mean the organization running this facility’s sick, twisted game is your—”

“The PTA.”

“That has nothing to do with this game, but she just mentioned the absolute last people you wanna get on the bad side of! They’re like the polar opposite of Live-On!”

“Hah ha ha! Sure you want to go through with this, Nekoma-senpai? The PTA

won't stay silent if you end the life of a child with such a bright future! Huh? It's the same PTA that wipes my behind, you know? So? Now what?"

"Wh-Why you... What a cowardly tactic! As your senior, Nekoma shall not allow you to use your position in life for evil! Now listen up, twerp! If you've got the PTA, we've got GTO!"

"GTO? Does GTO mean... No, it couldn't be!"

"Oh, but it is! Great... Huh? Great? The T was, uh... What was it again? Shuwa-chan, do you know what the T stood for?"

"Testicles."

"Yeah, that! Great Testicles! Uh... What was the O that came next? Shuwa-chan, do you know what the O is?"

"O'Testicles."

"That's it! You got that, Kaeru-chan? Nekoma here is Great Testicles O'Testicles, or GTO for short!"

"Hm... I'm terrified! Mama, save me!"

"You just insulted every GTO on the planet. I thought better of you, Nekoma-senpai."

"That's the most hypocritical thing I've ever heard! All right, Shuwa-chan, I'm making you do a you-laugh-you-lose playthrough of Last Resmellion!"

"What the heck's that? Some sorta video game?"

"Kaeru is curious too."

"It's a game that you could honestly reach the end of without so much as cracking a smile."

Kaeru-chan and I could only respond with a "What."

When all was said and done, Kaeru-chan was expelled, and the second round ended with another Inmate victory. Next up was round three, our final game of the night.

And just what awaited me in round three?

[Hareru Asagiri / Awayuki Kokorone — Imitator Side]

"We won this," I instinctively whispered to myself upon seeing those words.

: Yo, it's the Weather Squad!

: yeah, and the forecast is a natural disaster

: Incredibly About To Lose Voice: "We won this."

: All I know is that *something* will go horribly wrong

: So, Harerun's finally on the Imitator side... What's gonna happen?

"Ahh, sorry folks, having Hareru-senpai on my team means you'll just be watching on easy mode. Really, I can't lose with *these* odds on my side. After all, I am a genius!"

: inb4 "Oh no!"

: Wow, what a magic trick! The (death) flags just keep coming out of her mouth!

: I heard the word "genius" so I brought a gundam

: damn, he came to kill

: I heard the word "genius" so I decided to apply myself in school for the first time in my life

: Weird timing, but good for you.

: I'm turning forty this year, and the nickname my parents have for me is "Lazy Leech." But what I really wanna be leechin' on is some young girl's bottom, gyeh heh heh! ¥6969

: On second thought, you had perfect timing. Let's get

started on that homework.

: please, I don't want to imagine the Bottom Biting Bug growing into that

: Is this one of those "pervert" things I keep hearing about?

: lmao @ him actually sending a super

: Don't spend your parents' money to write 6969.

: all of my kusa

Hmm, how should I go about this? With Hareru-senpai as my partner, I could probably get away with anything outside of *trying* to lose... Yeah, we were just starting out, so I figured I'd just tag along with Hareru-senpai! I was curious to see how she'd play the game too.

"Really, Hareru-senpai might not have gotten the chance to shine in the first two games since she was killed as a defenseless Inmate, but this time, I've got an unstoppable genius on my side! This isn't a werewolf game anymore, it's a Dynasty Warriors game! Werewolf Warriors, on sale today, baby! The Inmates' dream of beating us is just pie in the sky!"

: Laputa: Pie in the Sky

: pls2move your pie, i'm trying to see that *sparkling horizon*

: Love how they dedicated the theme song to your partner by calling it "Carrying You."

: lolse!

: Don't ruin Balse like that.

: I can see Hareru-senpai getting expelled just because people were suspicious that she didn't die first.

: "You have to be an Imitator because you're still alive"

would be pretty lol

: why is she *talking* like a joke villain too...

I followed behind Hareru-senpai and arrived at Sector 2. Us Imitators found ourselves together with Mashiron and Sei-sama.

“Oh? Are we gonna go for it? Are we goin’ for a double kill? Hareru-senpai’s right up next to Sei-sama, so that means we’re goin’ for it, right? Well then, I’ll go for it before Mashiron gets away!”

Sei-sama looked engrossed in a minigame, and Hareru-senpai was stuck right next to her. She was probably pretending to do a minigame too. There wasn’t another soul around; this was the perfect chance.

“All righty then, I’m diggin’ in! Awwwgh yeaaah, Mashiron’s body feels so guuuuuhhd!!!”

Not wanting to let this golden opportunity slip away, I made a beeline for Mashiron and killed her on the spot.

Phew... (post-kill clarity)

Now then, Hareru-senpai, go ahead and give that normie what’s coming to her!

Uh... Hareru-senpai?

“Hareru-senpai, why aren’t you killing her? I mean, if you don’t hurry up, our cover’s gonna get blown!”

For some reason, Hareru-senpai showed no inclination toward killing Sei-sama. No, wait, she wasn’t even moving!

Seriously, why?! Sei-sama was just a few seconds away from finishing her minigame and reporting me!

Weren’t you pretending to do a minigame to check if the coast was clear?!

Wait... Hold on a sec. “Check” what, again? Don’t tell me—

“Does Hareru-senpai have her map open?!”

This game gave Imitators plenty of reasons to frequently open their maps,

from checking up on Inmate locations to setting up obstacles. And obviously, an open map covered almost your entire screen. Did that mean...that at this very moment, Hareru-senpai was pretending to play a minigame as a cover to check her map, so she hadn't even noticed that I'd just killed Mashiron?!

"Hey, this is bad! Like super frickin' bad! Sei-sama's gonna finish her minigame! Do I just have to run? No, that'd pin the suspicion on Hareru-senpai! What do I do?!"

Baffled by this unprecedented development, I stood stock-still. While I was panicking, Sei-sama finished her minigame...and if that weren't enough, Hikari-chan dropped by from another Sector.

"RIP."

My emotionally drained voice gave way to the screen shifting to a meeting after a body report.

[Mashiro Irodori: Dead]

C-Calm down! This was Hareru-senpai we were talking about here; she had to have some sort of plan. It had to be on purpose, just a single stepping stone on our way to victory.

Right? That's what it is, Hareru-senpai, right?!

"..."

RIP.

Just then, I'd heard Hareru-senpai slip in a word under her breath in front of the others. I didn't think anyone else noticed, but as someone clinging to the slightest shred of hope, I did.

"Hey you, ya mix of StroZero and human," she said out loud.

"Whatchoo want?"

"Since when was *that* your accent?"

Our back-and-forth got a few laughs, but with Hikari-chan's testimony, it felt

like the whole group knew who their Imitator was. I didn't even feel any tension, which just made me even sadder...

What was the play here? I guess I could start by denying it.

"It's all a mistake, yep. Wasn't me, yep."

"If Awayuki-dono says so, then I see no reason to think otherwise."

"Hikari will believe her too! It's not foolish to believe! It's a sign of strength!"

Sorry, I got surprised because I didn't expect anyone to actually believe me. Alice-chan was a sweet girl. Maybe I'd give her my panties sometime. But Hikari-chan was literally the witness, so it was kind of a problem if she was believing me...

Still, nobody else seemed less likely to vote me out... Well, in that case, I was gonna go out fighting.

"Aw, drat! My All-Star-flavored StroZero is so destructive that I accidentally pressed the wrong button... Guess getting high off your own supply during a werewolf game isn't the optimal strat..."

My excuse seemed like an acceptance of my loss at first glance, but my real goal was to throw off any suspicion that I'd gone for a double kill. It might have been futile, but if I could draw any suspicion away from Hareru-senpai, then it was worth a shot!

"I saw Shuwacchi next to a dead body too, so it is what it is. I think we could expel Shuwa-chan and consider Seisei and I to be as good as innocent. Oh, and odds are that Pikarin's safe too."

Ah, so Hareru-senpai was cutting me off too, huh... No, it was all right. Not even ten seconds had passed between our stop in Sector 2 and my kill being reported. It wasn't strange for her not to notice, and it was arguably my fault for not realizing that she had to be looking at her map if she was standing stock-still.

"All right, Shuwa-chan, now take the crib."

"Shion-mama, don't you mean 'take the stand'?"

"Take the crib."

“Fine, don’t want to *crib* your style. Get it?”

It was time for the hammer of judgment to fall.

“Now then, Shuwa-chan, do you have any last words?”

That meant...this would be my dying message. I took a deep breath and spoke in a clear voice, free from regret:

“After I die, please delete my browser history.”

[Awayuki Kokorone: Dead]

Their answer was displayed on my screen. Long story short, I was out.

Still, was it just me, or was Hareru-senpai off her game today? It felt like she hadn’t gotten a single chance to take action...

“Oh.”

At that moment, I realized. Hareru-senpai’s two early deaths and our failed double kill could all be chalked up to bad luck.

No, not just bad luck; it was an outright curse. And if Hareru-senpai was known for one thing in games, it’s that she was astoundingly cursed at them. If she was after a character on a gacha banner, it was considered a miracle if she managed to pull them before having to spark. Her viewers often joked that it wasn’t even a gacha at that point—that character’s price was just how much it took to hit the limit. The Hareru Curse showed itself in plenty of different ways, and usually got plenty of laughs from the chat.

And now that I thought about it, wasn’t all of this a sign that the Hareru Curse had manifested itself in *Amidst Us*?!

“How is someone *this* cursed?! This is *stupidly* cursed! Why, God, do you need to make Hareru-senpai suffer like thiiiiiiis?!”

I shouted out my frustrations, but it wasn’t like that would change anything. The odds of one Imitator against eight Inmates were downright *dire*. I almost wanted to say it was impossible, but I managed to swallow those words; a dead Imitator could still call in obstacles, so I had to dedicate myself to supporting

Hareru-senpai.

But the shocker that played out before my eyes was almost the polar opposite of my pathetic whining.

“What in the world...?”

With the maneuvers of a trained assassin, Hareru-senpai was making plays that were both daring and precise to kill Inmate after Inmate.

Of course, she could never hide the evidence; there would surely come times when suspects had to be brought forward. But when they did, Hareru professed her innocence based on how she hadn’t taken that double kill with me.

Being a lone wolf slowed down the speed at which the Imitators could kill, but Hareru made up for it with her silver tongue as she convinced the Inmates to expel their allies and move things along. She dutifully cast suspicion on everyone from Ehrai-chan to Shion-mama to Hikari-chan while taking out any other streamer who could lead a conversation with her bare hands.

And in the end...

[Imitator Side: Victory]

Those were undoubtedly the words lighting up my screen.

“I’m sorry, Shuwacchiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

Everyone else sounded more impressed than shocked, but the first words that the winner Hareru-senpai had for me were an apology.

“Hey, these sort of things happen, so it’s totally all right... But man, to think we actually won... Did you *actually* not take the double kill on purpose?”

“Heck no! Even *I* don’t want to lose Imitators on my team, and you can watch the archive to see me apologizing in tears if ya don’t believe me!”

“A-All right, I believe you!”

“Really, I *swear*! After getting insta-killed the first two rounds, thank *goodness* I didn’t end off the night with a straight-up war crime!!!”

Hareru-senpai shouted straight from the soul, to which everyone responded with laughter and applause, bringing the Live-On All-Star Collab to a close. In the end, Hareru-senpai had shown that not even a curse could stop her from powering through with raw skill.

Idle Talk: Awayuki Kokorone Answers Castellas

“Good evening, everyone. It looks like another nice, light snow is falling tonight. I'm Awayuki Kokorone, of Live-On's third generation. Now then, as we scheduled, I'll be answering Castellas!”

The night of that festive Live-On-wide gathering over *Amidst Us* gave way to dawn. And today was a return to something more familiar, answering Castellas; the rules of yesterday's game meant we didn't interact with our viewers much, after all. This would be a good chance to deepen my bonds with the viewers who've always supported me.

“Teehee! I'm not drunk, mind you. I'm in my seiso mode! So how about I get a little flirty over these Castellas for my lonely little viewers? Anyway...” *Pshhh!*
Gulp Gulp “Pheeeeew! Awwright, seiso mode's shut down! C'mon, you thought you'd get to spend a stream with Awa-chan? C'mon, didja, didja? Sorry, but it was I, Shuwa-chan!”

: I'm going home.

: me too

: aww

: ass

: Careful, you wouldn't like me when I'm angry...

: No wait i didn't mean that last comment i was trying to say aww i didn't want to make a one-word innuendo i promise

: ^ lmao

: one-word innuendo (as you do)

: hell no i don't

: go to sleep

“Um, I wonder why my viewer count just dropped off a cliff... Oh, woe is me, I could shed tears of StroZero...”

: kusa

: wtf are Tears of StroZero

: It is like those water drops that form on the cans?

: I'm back

: i was just kiiiidding

“Oh, it looks like everyone’s starting to come back! Jeez, why is this sorta stuff the only thing you guys can come together over?”

: geheheheh, my b lmao

: It might be like what you said before about wanting to bully someone you've got a crush on.

: Yeah, definitely.

“Huh, w-well, I *suppose* I can forgive you just this once. Heh heh, now let’s get on to the first Castella!”

Q: My nipples aren’t coming off

“Then don’t frickin’ take ’em off, dumbaaaaass!!!”

: ?!?!

: give us some warning next time lol

: and the first one we start with is a total shitcast lol

: Shitty castella, or shitcast for short. I like how it's foul enough to sound like a bowel movement.

: Does this still count as bullying your crush?

: It sure does.

: For real? All right, guess I'm done being a fan of Alice.

Alice Soma: Why me?!

: kusa

: yep, alice is already in here

“Seriously, what goes through the heads of people who send Castellas like these? I got this stuff maybe one out of every ten messages back when I started out, but it’s been half shitcasts ever since the time I forgot to turn off my stream! You guys put such weird shit in your Castellas that I feel like I’m playing Russian roulette every time I open one!”

: cool story bro

: Well hey, I didn't want the water I scooped up from the well to turn into StroZero, so right back at ya! ¥5000

: Don't start a metaphor war.

: My nipples really DON'T come off, what do you want me to do about it?!

: Aww, Shuwa-chan, you made the sender mad.

“I’m the one who oughta be mad, you jackaaaaaass!!!”

Q: When’s the Mana Hoshino collab?

“Oh, come on... Sure, this Castella might *look* normal, but this guy’s just trolling as hard as the last one, because you know that ain’t ever happening...”

: Mana-chan?!

: Never thought I'd be hearing ManaHoshi's name here.

: def didn't sound like it came from honest curiosity to me lol

Why did I have such a disappointed reaction to this Castella, you ask? It was because of the name it mentioned: Mana Hoshino-chan.

Mana-chan was a VTuber, just like me. And that was where the similarities ended. Long story short, she was a legend of the industry. Anyone who had the slightest inkling of VTuber knowledge had surely heard her name.

She was born at the dawn of the VTubing industry—long before Live-On came into existence with Hareru-senpai's debut, and in fact before the very concept of a VTuber agency came into existence.

Her long list of achievements began back when you could count the number of active VTubers on one hand; she put forth unique projects and videos one after another with the help of the corporation that employed her, eventually leading the industry and shaping what it was today. Soon enough, she was on the tip of anyone's tongue when talking about VTubers; what fans called the Elite Four of VTubing was composed of her and three other VTubers who'd reached her level of notoriety at the time.

She was shining as brightly as the stars that were her namesake. And what's even more impressive was that she never stopped; she was as active as ever to this very day.

Mana-chan was always pioneering at the forefront of this industry. Given the rise of agency-assigned streamers like us, VTubers today might not stand out the way they once had, but I doubted there was a single person in this field who didn't regard her as a legend, if not a deity.

I might have only gotten into VTubers through Live-On, but even I found myself drawn to her. Of course there was a part of me that wished I *could* meet her, perhaps through a collab just like that Castella suggested, but, well...

"You're talking about a legend of VTubing. I'm just a legend of forgetting to

stop VTubing.”

: o-oh...

: the self-own lmao

: Hey, you're a popular streamer in your own right!

: Popularity's one thing, but Mana-chan's an idol, yeah. Gotta be rough out there...

Yep, it was just like that commenter said: Mana-chan's activities were very much on the idol side of things, and Mana-chan herself exuded the decorum of a seasoned professional. Pretty much the polar opposite of a group like Live-On where total chaos was part of the appeal. Having the chance to collab with her would be an honor in itself, so when you added that hurdle on top of it...

“Well, I think you can write off the idea of *me* collabing with her. I guess maybe Hareru-senpai might have a shot?”

Figured I was going to end up answering this way. Honestly, she was so far out of my league that it was hard to feel like I was giving up on anything at all—you know how it is. Just gotta wash the bad thoughts down with a swig of StroZero...

Q: What facial toner do you use?

“Yes! This is it! This is the kind of Castella I've been waiting for!”

: lol @ how hype she just got

: Baffled that a normal question made it through.

: You wear facial toner?

“Of course I wear facial toner! I *am* a girl! Hold up, lemme go get it...”

: It's StroZero, we already know.

: Oh, moving on to can 2?

: I feel like if I asked Awa-chan to buy some water, she'd instinctively come back with StroZero.

“I’m baaack! I use the stuff from IPSA, the ones with the wavy bottles. I think it’s pretty famous.”

: Oh, that!

: Phew, it's actually facial toner.

: I'll look it up.

“I wonder, did a girl send this Castella? My viewers tend to skew male, so I just get so excited. Oh, but then again, it’s pretty normal for boys to wear facial toner nowadays, so it’s hard to tell.”

: What're you talking about? They're gonna drink it, duh.

: There's no way they don't plan to drink it.

: They absolutely asked so they could drink it.

“Uh? Dr-Drink? Facial toner?!”

Alice Soma: I've already purchased five bottles! ¥4400

: Drinking it is so normal that you don't want to know what she bought all those bottles for

: she actually paid for the info lmaoooo

“Eugh... For real? Do you people, like, need help?”

: love how she's legit creeped out

: I mean, there are already idol fans who drink their oshi's shampoo, so...

: C'mon, Shuwa-chan, you know you'd want to drink facial toner if it were Mashiron's, right?

“All right! I’m asking Mashiron what facial toner she wears next time I see her! Aw man, I’m gettin’ turned on!”

: Eugh...

: World peace, you love to see it

Q: It's getting close to summer. Do you have any plans to go out?

“Heh heh heh! All right, I have a little announcement to make! If you can believe it, Hikari-chan and I decided to have a little date offline tomorrow!”

: Say what?!

: **¥21111**

: A date with Shuwa-chan... Hope Hikari-chan has her chastity belt on tight.

: You're actually meeting up offline?!

: A date with Hikari-chan... What's on the itinerary? Fighting lions in Africa?

“We’re just going to look for clothes, so no epic lion battles for us! Also, I’m leaving the StroZero at home, so she won’t be needing a chastity belt! Got it? I couldn’t even get any lucky peeks if she wore one of those, so she definitely won’t need it!”

: Ah, so you're going to a boutique underground fighting ring to fight the lion.

: you could always step back from the lion thing for two seconds

: I see, so they're going to fight Brian.

: who tf is Bryan

: the chastity belt's starting to sound pretty necessary

: Hmm, but I'm not sure it'd do much to stop Shuwa-chan since her saliva can melt metal...

: What is she, Alien?

: Alien vs. Predator vs. Shuwa-chan vs. Coughing Baby

: Leaving the StroZero at home... So you usually take it with you when you leave the house, huh...

: WALKING THE STROZERO

“Well, you know, it all came about because I was chatting with Hikari-chan and I mentioned how I didn't have any summer clothes. She was all, 'All right, let's go!' over it. Extroverts don't waste time, I tell ya...”

: Is Hikari-chan like that offline too?

: Well Chami-chan's an extrovert too, but she moves at a glacial pace.

: She's an anomaly. She's got the soul of an introvert in the shell of an extrovert.

: A sheep in wolf's clothing...

: that's not how it works lol

: Do you not have any clothes, Shuwa-chan?

“I guess I don’t have much more than the bare minimum... I kinda live like a shut-in, so even if I bought new clothes, I wouldn’t have any chances to wear them... And I didn’t have any money either... But it’s a new year and a new me! I’ll take in the natural beauty of the seasons if it’s the last thing I do!”

After answering a few more Castellás, running my date plans by my viewers, and listening to them shoot down all my virgin-brained fantasies with no mercy, I found a nice spot to start wrapping up the stream.

I’m so excited for this date with Hikari-chan!

Chapter 2: A Date with Hikari-chan

Just like I'd said I would during the Castella stream, I went out on my date with Hikari-chan.

Today was the day following that date. My legs were still sore, so I desperately averted my attention from being reminded of the three-word phrase known as "out of shape" as I started up my stream. I'd be reminiscing about our trip together as I reported the details to my viewers.

Also, I swore to myself that I'd spend some more time on Long Fit...

"Good evening, everyone. It looks like another nice, light snow is falling tonight. I'm your very seiso Awayuki Kokorone, and..."

"Konpikaaa, everyone!!! The light of the festival is here for all to enjoy! lllllllllllit's Hikari Matsuriya!"

"My, Hikari-chan, you seem a bit peppier than usual. I fear your energy might make me melt. I apologize, that was a lie, I thought a normie had descended upon me, so my heart froze to its very core."

"That's 'cause Hikari went bowling today, so her body's all fired up!"

"Just like a real normie would. You never cease to impress, Hikari-chan."

"Quit the 'normie' stuff! Hikari went alone, you know!"

"Oh, alone? And after all that walking around you did with me? May I ask why?"

"The world of baseball's been picking up steam lately, so Hikari figured she'd switch gears and become a pro baseball player VTuber!"

"So you thought to go bowling...why?"

"Why d'ya think?"

Ah, yes, it seems the Live-On began early today, I thought.

The proposition seemed ridiculous at a glance, but Hikari-chan and I had a

history together, and this was just a day after she'd run me all over town. This would be the perfect time to show off what Hikari-chan would call the power of friendship!

Hmm, baseball into bowling, I thought. I see, I see... Yes, I've put it all together.

"It must be because—"

"Wrong!"

"Hikari-chan, I was under the impression that this question was really a test of our friendship. Please, imagine how it feels for me to be shot down before having the chance to answer."

"Sorry, Hikari just wanted to explain herself so much that she just jumped in..."

"Really now, a bit of patience would do you good."

"Gooot it!"

"Now then, allow me. It must be because you wanted to train your dominant hand!"

"Wrong! But you were kinda close!"

Yep, it was a lost cause. The power of friendship wasn't gonna be enough to understand the impossible, not when everyone in Live-On operated on a fundamentally different plane of common sense. If anything, I deserved credit for being close.

Really, I thought, being able to communicate with the people in Live-On should count as being multilingual. What an international place that Live-On is.

"So, may I ask what the correct answer is?"

"Baseball is a sport about throwing a ball! That means if I could throw a bowling ball, I'd be unstoppable! Size = strength! And that's what I was practicing!"

"Hikari-chan, baseball only lets you use one ball. Even the wacky stuff like Dokaben followed that rule."

“There’s a two-way player who does the impossible and turns any game into Shotime! What’s so wrong with Hikari throwing a bowling ball?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“Oh, you’re right! Well, that’s life. But hey, Hikari got a good workout from bowling, so it all evens out!”

“Glad you understand. Also, please don’t ever throw a bowling ball like you would a baseball, all right? You’d crack the floor.”

“Please, Hikari would never have such poor manners! Hikari is a girl who does the right thing, and that means having good manners!”

“In that case, please use a regular baseball.”

“Yeah, Hikari’s gonna throw a two-hundred-kilometers-per-hour pitch!”

“You’re setting your goals too high. Could you at least start with one hundred?”

: Konpika!

: The Snowfest Duo!

: Hikari's Hikari-ing right out of the gate

: Prince of Tennis would probably let you get away with a bowling ball

: it's fair play compared to fighting against the Pirates of the World

: (The ball) is just Gigant-ic, dude...

: just imagining the catcher and the umpire getting knocked down like bowling pins

: (barely alive umpire voice) "Strike!"

: scoring a ball would probably get called a gutter

: it wouldn't be Batter Out, it'd be Pitcher Out

: The new rule against sticky stuff means I can't fap during games ;_;

: Don't excrete sticky stuff from your crotch, plzkthx.

: a dead ball in more ways than one

Hikari-chan was always living life with passion, I had to give her that. “Look before you leap” was a phrase that had probably never crossed her mind in her life.

It was a miracle that she’d grown up to be so pure and honest; as the one Live-On member who didn’t go for lowbrow humor, she might’ve even qualified as a chill vibes streamer. I will accept *many* complaints.

“Now then, as I announced before, Hikari and I spent all day together, so this stream will center around recounting our date. A pleasure to have you along, Hikari-chan.”

“Pleasure to be heeere!!!”

It had been such an eventful day that I wasn’t sure where to begin, so I had to start out with some thinking. “Well,” I said, “I’m sure plenty of my viewers want to hear the events in detail, so perhaps we’ll begin by having a casual chat about our meeting.”

“Hikari has no time to live casually!”

“Understood, in that case, that will be all for today’s stream, let us meet again when the light snow falls.”

“Aaah, aaah, sorry, sorry! I’m apologizing, so let’s go back to the memories!”

Just like Chami-chan and I had done at the amusement park, Hikari-chan and I called each other by our real names during the date proper. But since we were streaming now, we went by our streamer names for the following story.

Hikari-chan would be showing me around a bunch of stores since I didn’t know much about fashion, so we decided to meet up in front of the train

station. However, I saw that it was Hikari-chan who arrived at our meetup location first. Even from a distance, I could recognize her appearance as the very image of a radiant extrovert.

She sure arrived early, I thought. Yeah, I'm arriving ten minutes before the time we agreed on...but did I make her wait?

I walked at a slightly brisker pace.

“W-Wait, how’d she notice me already?!”

There was still plenty of distance between us, but even though I was dressed so plainly that I could have faded into the background, Hikari-chan noticed me in an instant before waving her hands wide and dashing over.

Meanwhile, I was embarrassed to learn that I was standing out even a little. Was this the difference between introverts and extroverts? I was nothing compared to Chami-chan, but I still fell into the category of the former, so I just hoped that I could get through this date in one piece...

“Yoohoo, Awayuki-chan! Hikari was waiting!”

“Hello, Hikari-chan. I’m impressed you noticed me from that far away.”

“That’s ‘cause Hikari’s got great eyes! And Hikari’s not gonna forget the face of one of her bestest friends!”

“Should have known. And it looks like you got here pretty early... I’m starting to worry that I kept you waiting for a while.”

“Hikari only waited for an hour!”

“Ah, yeah, it’s probably not my fault then—it’s definitely just that you came too early!”

“Hikari was too excited to stay cooped up at home! And Hikari was staying in contact with work, so she was still busy! And Hikari doesn’t wanna be late! Never breaking a promise is just who Hikari is!”

Hikari-chan, a girl who was honest but just a bit off-kilter, had me shocked from her first words. I could tell from how she played her games, but she really had a tendency to go overboard in everything she did... I decided that next time, I’d put a little more strategizing into how I invited her to counter that.

Wait, was it normal to think up strategies to counter how your own friend thinks? W-Well, it was probably fine, as long as I didn't think too hard on it.

"Guess you're the type to not get any sleep the night before a field trip, Hikari-chan. Were you all right last night?"

"Hikari slept soundly for two whole hours, so she's in tip-top condition!"

"You mean *only* two hours! You sure you're not short on sleep?!"

"Hmm, not really? Two hours of sleep has always been plenty. Hikari's one of those short sleepers, probably!"

"You mean it's normal for you? That's...really something..."

Or so I said, but I was honestly a bit worried. Then again, her body had to have some kind of superpower to be capable of beating games under the downright torturous conditions she always challenged herself to, so as an entertainer, you could maybe consider it a talent. The Hikari-chan I was looking at seemed bursting with energy either way, so maybe it was best to consider her a type of genius who flew well beyond the limits of my understanding, just like Hareru-senpai. I didn't want to get on her nerves by worrying too much, so I decided to leave it at that.

"It's Hikari's first time walking around town with Awayuki-chan!"

"I-It is, isn't it..."

It wouldn't do to spend the whole day chatting at the station, so the two of us started to walk around the city. Just one thing...

She was close! This girl's sense of personal space was way too small!!!

She didn't think twice about locking arms with me, so we were making constant physical contact. And since I was taller, I had to gaze down into her face at point-blank range every time I wanted to carry on our conversation.

Aaahh, the peppy face of an extroverted girl, an experience that had eluded me my entire life, was right in front of me... This fresh experience was making my brain go haywire...

And Hikari's choice of fashion was a revealing, off-the-shoulder summertime top, so I got an eyeful of her supple skin to boot...

I had to cool down. If I thought too much about it, I was going to get heatstroke, and not the kind you asked a VTuber to say slowly.

“Hmm? What’s up, Awa-chan? You’ve been all stiff.”

“Whaaaaat, ha ha, no, I was just thinking, ‘Oh, hey, we must look like girlfriends here.’ It’s fine, though. You’re not hot, right?”

“Hikari’s a-okay! Hikari swears to complete the mission of shopping with Awayuki-chan! Hikari will protect you from any assailants that come our way, so have no fear!”

It looked like this was a result of Hikari-chan treating our date as an escort mission. I got the feeling that sticking together so tightly would get in the way of protecting me, but... Wait, no, there were other problems.

“I kinda get the feeling that a regular civilian doesn’t really need a bodyguard in modern Japan...”



“Oh, but on the contrary! You never know if you could be suddenly attacked by an unknown life-form camouflaging as human, or if gigantic insects that nest underground suddenly decide to surface and wreak havoc, or if aliens from outer space launch a full-scale invasion of Planet Earth!”

“Um, I’m pretty sure I *do* know...”

“You can’t let your guard down! The world is full of danger! But never fear, because Hikari is here! And Hikari will be sure to deliver Awayuki-chan home without so much as a fingerprint laid upon her lovely little body!”

“Wh-Why, thank you very much...”

I got the feeling that it was too late for fingerprints given how many Hikari-chan’s “protection” had surely left on me, but thinking about it was a trap.

We talked about this and that as Hikari-chan dragged me along, escorting me with no regard for the glances of onlookers curious about the two girls on the sidewalk locked arm in arm.

Wait a minute, I realized. Is this that legendary SSR situation of a plain Jane girl getting flustered around a friendly extrovert on a date together?

“Have ya decided on what clothes you want?” she asked.

“Ahh, I haven’t really settled on anything. I don’t have much faith in my fashion sense to begin with...”

“Gotcha! Awayuki-chan has a heart big enough to take in the opinions of others! That’s so cool!”

“I don’t think there’s that much to it...”

I got the feeling that dwelling on how miraculous of a situation I had landed in would make it hard to keep up the conversation, so I had to mentally beat myself back down to barely maintain my composure.

Calm down, Awayuki, I told myself. Sure, every aspect of Hikari-chan’s very existence is so adorable that you want to worship the ground she walks on, but compared to that, what are you? Without any StroZero in you, you’re just an empty can on legs. You might be someone on stream, but out here, you’re a faceless nobody. Don’t get cocky!

Phew. Yep, I was better off staying in the audience for scenes like these. Imagining myself as a main character here made my head go blank.

“So, where do you normally buy clothes? Like what you’ve got on now?” she asked.

“This stuff? I don’t even remember where I bought it. I usually just go by stores like UNIPLO, CU, or Yamamura and buy whatever’s cheap and plain.”

“So you’ve reached a state of mind obtained only by trimming your needs down to the bare necessities! That’s, like, *mondo* cool!”

The grace and kindness of Hikari-chan’s all-affirming attitude made me want to shed tears.

My outfit today was a plain white T-shirt on top and an all-black pair of wide-legged pants, nothing more. It was a fully functional combo that ensured I wouldn’t stand out like a sore thumb.

Also, if anyone said that I looked like the Light and Darkness Dragon from Yu-Gi-Oh, I’d rip them into a one-hundred-piece Exodia that would never get put back together ever again, so watch out. Draw! Left Pinky of the Forbidden One! Draw! Hamstring of the Forbidden One! Draw! Forbidden One of the Forbidden One (innuendo)! Sorry, Yugi, but your Grandpa’s deck is gonna be nothing *but* pathetic cards once I’m through with you.

Hey, now, it wasn’t like I never had an interest in fashion, right? I had a longing for beauty back in my student years. But you know, I started working at the company from hell after graduation, and soon enough, survival alone became my top priority. I didn’t have the time, the freedom, or the money to dress myself up, and by the end of it all, I couldn’t even see a meaning in doing so.

But now, it’s the birth of a whole new me! I’d be meeting my fellow streamers offline for collabs and hangouts a lot more often in the future, so I had to reach the bare minimum level of fashion so I wouldn’t feel ashamed to stand in their presence!

“You’re actually fashionable, Hikari-chan. Not like me.”

“Really? Thanks! Too bad money gets tight to make up for it... The hard part

about clothes is that if you get serious picking stuff out, you'll get sticker shock in no time!"

"Teehee, everything I'm wearing now probably wouldn't add up to ten thousand yen."

"Really?! Guess when you change the design, even stuff made of the same material gets pricey. Hikari would probably hit that limit with just her underwear..."

"W-Wow, you don't say, huhhh."

Hearing the topic suddenly switch to underwear caught me off guard. Hearing it from someone as far removed from sexuality as Hikari-chan even made my heart skip a beat.

No, I had to stop myself, as my brain was falling to the same maturity level as a virgin teenage boy's. I was still a young maiden, so I couldn't afford to let a subject like this rattle me and give my viewers even more ammo to make fun of me with. I could totally handle underwear! Easy peasy!

"I have to say, I've never bought underwear that expensive. Lately, I've been reduced to buying the cheapest sets I can find online, it pains me to admit."

"Well, that's no good, Awayuki-chan! A dignified aura starts from the places people can't see! If you need proof, can't you feel the heat of Hikari's fighting spirit right now?"

"Hmm... Maybe... Possibly?"

"Oh? That's a weaker reaction than Hikari expected. How weird, I could've sworn I put on my favorites... Like this!"

"Huh?"

With that, Hikari undid the lock she had on my arm, brought a hand up to the back of my head, and pulled me down real close to her chest. She used her other hand to tug at the collar of her top, giving me and me alone a peek at its contents.

"..."

"See? Hikari's wearing the good stuff! So...uh, Awayuki-chan? What's wrong?"

I could feel my consciousness slipping away. And yet, the inside of my mind was wrapped in a sensation of bliss that could only be described as heavenly. If I was to remain a virgin my entire life, then so be it. Experiencing a sensation like this made it all worth it.

Ah, I had but one message to share with my comrades the world over:

“The Underwear was Red.” —Yuri Faparin

“Heeey. Eearth toooo Awayuki-chaaan.”

Ah!

“H-Hikari-chan?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing?!?!”

My spirit had ascended to Heaven for a few seconds, but Hikari-chan’s voice brought me back to reality. I wasn’t just close to getting red in the face—I was close to getting red out the nose. Yes, red, just like the bright red underwear that Hikari was...wearing...like her...underwear...

Gwwwwaaaaaaaauuuuugh?!?!?!?!?

“Really, what are you so shook up over? You’re bein’ weird! We’re both girls, so this oughta be totally fine!”

“R-Riiight, we totally are, aha ha ha ha, s-sorry about that.”

Was that true? Did extrovert girls really do this stuff all the time? Or was Hikari-chan being a little too trusting here?!

Ah, nope, I couldn’t do it. I was trying not to dwell on the situation like a weirdo, but there was no escaping my role as the plain friend who has her heart rocked to its core by the extrovert’s energy.

Ooh, what would I do, that heat just wasn’t leaving my head... This was a development I’d have welcomed in a work of fiction, but I didn’t have a clue how to react now that it was happening to me.

“So? So? What’d ya think of Hikari’s action underwear? Did you feel the flames of Hikari’s heart?”

“A-Action underwear?!” I-If she was wearing that on a date, then was it okay for me to think...that she *wanted* action?!

What do I do?! I don't have anything like that, I just came wearing the cheapest crap I own! I may as well have shown up braless!

Actually, hold on. Hikari-chan didn't just put on underwear, she coordinated a full-body outfit. Which meant that I should have come in a full-body birthday suit, right?

Yeah, that was right!!! If anyone had a problem with me being naked, let 'em, I say! I'd tell them that I was wearing clothes that only people who were down to get down could see! Nudity was the uniform of sexual negotiation! The regalia of reproduction! Where are your manners?! One who intends to get laid shouldn't be coming in with clothes on! It's only proper etiquette to go on a date in the nude!

But wait. If Hikari-chan was planning to get some action with me, then why did she come fully clothed? Wasn't this a violation of good etiquette?

No, wait... This theory that was putting my remaining sanity into question began from Hikari-chan's action underwear—in other words, her clothes. Had I made a miscalculation along the way?

Think, girl. Think as though you were a reasonable Japanese adult who understood the dos and don'ts of etiquette. For what purpose does action underwear exist? What difference lies between it and regular underwear?

The answer: it was to accentuate your appeal. In other words...it was basically on the same level as makeup?

“Hey, Hikari-chan, would you consider fashion and makeup to be the same kind of thing?”

“Hm? Where's that coming from? Well, the goal for both is to bring yourself up, right?”

“I see!”

I had finally arrived at the correct answer. You couldn't go nude. For obvious reasons.

I had a newfound respect for how deeply the fashionable girls of the world thought about how to decorate themselves. The idea of nudity being the

uniform or not was one that had never crossed my mind before in my life, high school included. Yes, fashionable girls were on the cutting edge!

“This is Hikari’s battle armor, after all! I’ll repel any baddies who come our way!”

“Hm?”

With that, the girl next to me started doing some shadowboxing. Wait, something about this felt not quite right...

“Um, Hikari-chan, totally incidental question, but what do you think ‘action underwear’ is used for?”

“Hmm? For battle, of course! That’s what the ‘action’ means!”

“As in, physically? Or do you mean body-wise?”

“Hm??? Aren’t those the same thing?”

Shoot, this conversation was getting complicated. Wait, I had an idea!

“Well, it’s like, Hikari-chan, do you know why it’s called ‘action underwear’?”

“Hmm? It’s because a friend told me it’s important to wear your favorite action underwear when you have a special day!”

“Ah... I see.”

So, she’d taken the word “action” at face value. I finally understood why we weren’t quite seeing eye to eye. If anything, it was such a natural reason for Hikari-chan that I should have picked up on it earlier.

The surprise attack on my heart must have left me too flustered to think straight. Still, I now knew that I couldn’t maintain my sanity after these repeated surprise attacks (that Hikari surely considered perfectly normal), so I at least had to try making it through this date without doing anything weird...

“All right, we’re just about to reach the first store!”

“Ah, we’re finally getting started, huh?” I looked in the direction Hikari-chan was pointing in...and saw a quite fashionable boutique in its own right.

Crap, I wasn’t going to look so out of place that the staff looked at me like dirt, right? Even though I knew that nobody would bother having that much

interest in me, I still couldn't stop my victim complex.

"So, this place? One of Hikari's friends works here! And she's one of Hikari's few bestest friends who knows about what Hikari does nowadays!"

"Oh, is that true?!"

"Yep! Hikari knows it's not a store that's got everything under the sun, but since you said you didn't know much about these stores, Hikari figured that the least she could do was take you to a friend's place where you wouldn't be nervous!"

"Hikari-chan..."

"Once you're used to the atmosphere of this place, we can start hitting up the second store!"

I was moved by how kind this young lady was, but I had to wonder how she could still manage to be kind to others in spite of the torturous challenges she put herself through.

Respect, doubt, and loads of other emotions were bouncing around in my head, but if I were to sum them all up in a phrase, it'd be that I wanted to be her mom. I wanted to protect that pure heart for as long as I lived. I kept that thought to myself, of course, as Hikari-chan took me by the hand and led me into the store.

"Pardon us!"

"P-Pardon us..."

"Welcome!"

The store's staff all greeted us the moment we opened the door. Each had a radiance to their voice that matched their appearance, and all of their eyes were now on us. One of them walked briskly to our side.

"Yo, Aiko! Hikari made it!"

"Welcome, Hikari, I've been waiting."

The two exchanged friendly greetings, meaning that this had to be the friend Hikari-chan had talked about. Hikari-chan then casually greeted the rest of the

staff, who were watching from afar as they worked; from the smiles they returned to Hikari-chan, it looked like she was a regular here.

Once Aiko-san was done catching up with Hikari-chan, she turned her attention to me. I suppose it shouldn't have been any surprise for a fashion boutique employee, but she was so flawlessly dressed that she seemed invincible.

"Awayuki-san, was it? My name is Aiko. I'm an employee here, and I've heard about you from Hikari. I have to thank you for always looking after her."

"O-Oh, it's nothing! If anything, she's always helping *me* out..."

"Is that so? I'm sure you've realized after talking to her a bit, but that girl's a bit of a dummy, you know? I'm always so worried about what kind of trouble she's putting your management through..."

"Phooey! Hikari's not dumb! Besides, I'm rubber and you're glue!"

"Don't worry, Hikari, you're not dumb. You're a dummy."

"Those're the same thing!"

"No, they're completely different. The latter has a certain cuteness to it."

"Really? Aw, I get it! Sounds good to me, then!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure it does."

With how easily Aiko-san settled Hikari-chan down, I could tell that they were close. She struck me as the kind of highly capable woman who could defuse any situation with ease, so casual and oh-so-cool! The two of them seemed like opposites at a glance, but maybe they got along because each one's quirks balanced the other's out.

Bwah ha ha! I cackled to myself. Clever, but don't think you can deceive I, Awayuki! With everything I've experienced, I know full well that nowhere on this Earth exists a sane human who can relate to someone of Live-On! If she can relate to Hikari-chan, then something freakish surely lies beneath that facade of competence and composure! Hmph, there's nothing you could have up your sleeve that would shock me, not with the prior knowledge I came with. Now come at me, Aiko-san! Hit me with your most twisted fetishes!

“Sweet! Hikari’s gonna get clothes for Awayuki-chan!”

“Ah, right. I’d imagine anything would suit a figure as nice as Awayuki-san’s, so I’m excited to see the results.”

“Wh-Who, me? You’re too kind...”

The three of us soon began rummaging through the store.

So, I thought, *what’s gonna come first?*

“This is something that’s been trending lately. It’s a versatile design otherwise, so I recommend it.”

“I see...”

The garment Aiko-san picked out didn’t seem particularly bizarre; it was just a breezy-looking top with a pretty design.

Waiting for the right moment to bare your fangs, eh? All right, I see you.

“What do you think? Do you like this sort of style?”

“Umm...maybe? I don’t dislike it, but I’m so new to this that I can’t really imagine what I’d look like in it.”

“I see. In that case, I suggest trying it on first.”

“Ah, I think I will, then.”

“All right, then let’s find a few more items that would complement this. Having a full outfit will give you a better idea of how to choose pieces that go together.”

“Thank you so much!”

“This, and...yes, this should do. Hikari! We’ll be trying on clothes for a bit, so go ahead and keep searching.”

“Okie-doke!”

Aiko-san then led me to the changing room.

All right, if it’s gonna come, it’ll come here. There’s no juicier situation than a girl using the changing room!

“I’ll be waiting outside, so feel free to call if something doesn’t fit or you need

help putting something on.”

“Okay!”

“I’ll leave you to that, then.”

“...”

She...left, I realized.

Wait, for real? She was letting such a juicy chance pass her by? What person of Live-On would waste this opportunity to try something?

W-Well, if she wasn’t gonna come in, then fine, I’d just try on the clothes as usual. I was prepared for my freshly removed clothes to mysteriously go missing before opening the curtain and finding Aiko-san wearing them for a reason I couldn’t explain, but in reality, my clothes stayed firmly put; in fact, the dressing-room curtain showed no sign of moving even a millimeter. What in the world was going on?

Soon enough, I left the changing room. I took a liking to some of the clothes, so I decided to buy them. After all, I came into this planning to splurge, so I wasn’t going to hold back.

But that wasn’t what caught my attention. No, what did it was a shocking discovery.

You see, Aiko-san kept suggesting new outfit coordinations, and each one of them had some agreeable fashion sense to it, with absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. I dared to wonder, but...could it be?!

“Also, this and this would... Hm? What’s wrong? Your eyes are wide open in shock.”

“You have common sense...”

“Pardon?”

“Someone with common sense... They’re really real...”

“Er... I believe they call it ‘common sense’ because of how *common* it is, no?”

There was no mistaking it: this person had common sense. She was someone

tangentially related to Live-On who still had her sanity. They really *did* exist...

“I’m sorry, Aiko-san, I was beholden to my preconceived notions. I apologize for my rudeness.”

“Hm... I’m not certain what you were hoping for, Awayuki-san, but I apologize for not living up to your expectations.”

“Oh, not at all! If anything, I’m moved to tears, so can I get a photo?”

“I...suppose that would be fine.”

“Also, can I shake your hand?”

“Er... Feel free.”

“Woohoo! Shaking hands with a sane person feels like a dream come true!”

“Awayuki-san.”

“Yes?”

“I’m deeply, *deeply* sorry for Hikari’s behavior...”

“Huh, Hikari?! Why her?”

The Live-On infection had already reached my brain.

After settling down from the groundbreaking discovery that Aiko-san had common sense, I started to get used to the store’s fashionable atmosphere. I even got to the point where I could hold a relaxed conversation.

At the moment, Aiko-san was talking about Hikari-chan. Hikari-chan herself was off finding clothes with the other employees at the moment; she probably noticed that I wasn’t as nervous anymore, so despite how closely she’d clung to me earlier, she now felt okay with giving me some space.

It seemed like Aiko-san and Hikari-chan had been friends since high school. As someone who didn’t know much about the old Hikari-chan, I was very interested in any story about her that Aiko-san was willing to tell. It seemed like a good opportunity, so I asked away.

“Aiko-san, what’s the impression you get of Hikari-chan?”

“Impression, huh... Hm... I suppose I’d say she’s everyone’s dear little

dummy.”

“Ahh, I think I can see that.”

“She’s quite the character, no? I’m certain that’s why we got along in the first place.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, you see... Deep relationships aren’t quite my forte. I can handle light relationships, like those between customer and clerk, and if anything, I’d call them my specialty. But when someone takes a step too deep, well... I find myself starting to doubt their intentions, or being suspicious of everything... It’s a fault of my personality.”

“Hm... No, I think I can understand.” The way I saw it, the closer people got to you, the harder they pushed their ideals on you, whether they noticed it or not. Some people figured they might as well opt out of playing the game, to keep people at a distance and maintain their peace of mind. And I got the feeling that more people lived that way than you’d think.

“But with Hikari, well, I learned pretty quickly that she would never do anything I expected. She would betray me at every waking moment, which ironically put me at ease. It made her seem like she had nothing to hide.”

“Aha ha... Yeah, it’s hard to predict what Hikari-chan’ll do next...”

“At first I was just like, ‘What’s with this girl?!’ I sat in the seat next to her when I first started high school, and for her class introduction, she up and said that entire ‘I have no interest in ordinary humans’ speech! Starting high school off by making such a cringey first impression *on purpose* is like playing on hard mode!”

“So she’s been a masochist since high school, huh...”

“Well, she still turned out to be pretty popular with the class, so what else can you say?”

“Sounds like the impact she made swept you off your feet.”

“I mean, I wasn’t swept off my *feet*... Sure, that was how we first got to know each other, but still...”

Aiko-san spoke like she was complaining, but something about her seemed to enjoy it, and her tone sounded just like she was relating a friend's misadventures.

Ahh, I was getting the warm fuzzies. Now this was what friendship between girls was supposed to be like, just magnificent. I wondered if Hikari and I might be like this someday after we got to know each other better...

"There was also the time when we both started working at a diner where she announced to the manager that she 'was aiming to be a three-star chef' and made a whole mess for everyone."

"At a regular old diner?!"

"And to top it all off, she calls me one day a few years after graduation and says, 'Hikari learned that digital beings are immune to physical attacks and are therefore this world's ultimate life-form. So anyway, Hikari's gonna go be a VTuber! Hikari rejects her humanity! UREYYY!!!' And man, did that give me a migraine."

"So she was *serious* about that thing she said during MonSlay..."

Hikari-chan was Hikari-chan to the core.

"Also, she's generally an honest girl who will do what she's asked, but she always interprets the things she's asked in bizarre ways."

"Wha..."

"This really is a mystery, but Hikari seems to work by these really strange rules in her head, and it's like the things you tell her get converted by those rules."

"Like she's got a translation program running in her head?"

"Yes, exactly, it's like Hikari's brain only holds on to information that gets translated into Hikarinese."

"I know she said she 'rejected her humanity,' but was she actually human to begin with?"

"Well, what's even stranger is that while her interpretations may be unique, the results she gives you are what you'd normally expect, so it's basically a cute

quirk once you get used to it.”

“Uh, sure...”

Now that she mentioned it, Hikari-chan’s mind sure thought in a lot of shonen-manga-esque ways. After all, when she was guiding me to this place, she called herself my bodyguard against external foes.

“Also, when any sexual topics come up, her brain cuts out all the content like it has an age restriction on it.”

“I see, so that’s why talking about that stuff never gets through to her.”

“The inside of her head is a 4Kids dub.”

“That sounds like one *heck* of an insult.”

“Oh, have I been caught? Either way, Hikari outshines someone like me in more than enough areas to make up for it.”

“She does?”

“Absolutely. There are many areas in which I see flashes of talent from her, and I do respect that about her. For example... Hikari has quite the fashion sense.”

“Heeey! I picked out some real cool stuff!!!”

“See?”

At that call, I followed Aiko-san’s gaze to see Hikari-chan walking over with her hands full; it looked like she’d picked out top and bottom sets, plus accessories to boot.

“Look at these ripped jeans! Aren’t they cool?!”

Her number one recommendation seemed to be this pair of fairly ripped jeans. They weren’t too revealing, so even I’d feel comfortable wearing them.

“These scars... This equipment must surely have been the ancient armor of a battle-hardened warrior!”

“Huh? No, I think those are just designed that way—”

“This must be imbued with an Attack-boosting skill!”

“Wait, where are you getting ‘skills’ from? What exactly are you judging these clothes by?”

“Now, Awayuki-chan! Onward, to the changing room!”

“Huhwhaaa~?!”

“Take your time, dearies! ♪”

Hikari-chan took me to the changing room half by force, while Aiko-san saw us off with a full-faced customer-service smile.

A-Am I making a mistake? I wondered. Did this girl really pick this stuff out for its fashion? She knows we’re in a boutique and not an RPG’s armor store, right?

I had a bad feeling about it, but I couldn’t go against the flow and found myself changing my clothes.

Long story short, I was just overthinking it.

Despite my concerns, I changed into the clothes Hikari-chan gave me, and I guess I had this...punk look? The outfit gave off this rebellious vibe from head to toe, making me look like a stylish rock star. It was more than not bad—it made me feel like the full outfit had a place in my wardrobe. Even I could tell that combining such high-spec parts into such a cohesive look must have required downright outstanding fashion sense.

At that moment, I recalled a part of my conversation with Aiko-san.

“This really is a mystery, but Hikari seems to work by these really strange rules in her head, and it’s like the things you tell her get converted by those rules.”

Ah, so that was where the ancient armor stuff came from.



But Aiko-san said the real mystery was the fashion sense behind it...

“Well? A fascinating girl, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she really is.”

“I’m proud to call her my best friend.”

I was still a bit stunned, but Aiko-san wore the brightest smile I’d seen from her all day.

“We bought a *ton*!”

“We really did. Since you offered to help, Hikari-chan, I was planning to buy enough today to make it to the end of the summer.”

“There’s no rush; Hikari will help you out any time!”

“Really? Tee hee, in that case, let’s go shopping for something *you* need the next time we hang out.”

“Ooh, good idea! Hikari’s gonna do some thinking about what to buy!”

Bags full of the clothing I’d bought from the various stores we’d visited hung from my hands as we walked toward the station. Hikari-chan had volunteered to carry my baggage earlier, but after all the help she’d already given me, I couldn’t allow that.

It was looking like we’d split up once we reached the station. Still, in just one day, I went from knowing nothing about Hikari-chan to seeing sides to her that I had no idea existed. Maybe offline meetups had a special magic at deepening bonds. I was looking forward to the report stream we’d do together in the coming days.

Just then, I happened to remember what I’d talked about with Aiko-san as I’d left her store.

“I hope you can keep looking after Hikari. She may be a dummy, but I want her to keep being the light that she is.”

“Whoa, that’s something I should be asking you! Then again, I’m sure Hikari-

chan would be shining bright with or without me.”

“Oh, not at all. Relationships are an essential part of life, and that goes for Hikari’s as well. Hikari has a strong sense of duty. That’s a good thing, but sometimes that weight is just too much for her. When those times come, please be there to support her.”

“Sure. Hikari’s my friend too, after all. Tee hee, but Aiko-san, you almost sound like Hikari-chan’s mother.”

“Wha?! D-Don’t go making things weird! We’re friends! Friends!”

“Heeey, are ya done talking yet?”

“Ah, Hikari-chan’s calling for me,” I said. “I’ve gotta get going, but thanks for today.”

“I swear... Ah, before you go, can we exchange numbers? It might come in handy if something happens to Hikari.”

“I really *should* call you Aiko-mama...”

“You say something, top-mommy?”

“Wh-Why do you know about that?!”

“Hurry uuup already!” Hikari-chan called again.

Given Hikari-chan’s insistence, I then hurriedly exchanged contacts with Aiko-san and headed toward the next shop.

But something still nagged at me. Aiko-san’s request to support Hikari-chan sounded awfully serious. Had something happened to her in the past? To that lively, upstanding bundle of cheer who was loved by all?

I had the feeling that she was far better equipped to make it through life than someone like me, an introvert to the bone...but Aiko-san had spent a long time around Hikari-chan, so she surely saw something deeper in her that I was missing.

And that was starting to bother me, dang it. I was Hikari-chan’s coworker and genmate, so I had an advantage Aiko-san lacked. I couldn’t let myself be

outdone in Hikari-chan expertise.

“Oh, that store’s selling swimsuits! Summer’s here and Hikari hasn’t gone to the beach, so there’s an idea! Hey, Awayuki-chan, can we take a peek... On second thought, you might be carrying too much for that, sorry...”

“Oh, don’t worry, I can handle a little stop just fine. I’m curious too, so let’s take a look.”

“Really? Thanks! Okay, Hikari’s just gonna look for a little bit, so if you’ll excuse her...”

I followed Hikari-chan as she scampered into the store.

The beach, huh? I thought. I haven’t gone in years. If I’m trying to live my summer to the fullest, maybe I ought to buy a swimsuit this year and go.

Still...there sure are a lot of revealing swimsuits, huh? I can’t even imagine myself wearing them. That bikini stuff doesn’t cover any more than underwear does, but if you change the name, suddenly it’s okay to wear it in public. Ah, what simple creatures humans are.

Hm... That combination of “revealing” and “beach” suddenly made my mind think of a certain red, naked creature...but that was a being beyond the realm of science, so as far as I was concerned, it didn’t count.

“Hey, hey, Awayuki-chan! Look at this!”

“Yes, what is it? Wait, what is *that*?!”

As I was ruminating over the store’s swimsuit selection, Hikari-chan had returned with a swimsuit from a section deeper inside. But when I saw that swimsuit, my comprehension took a few moments before it was able to catch up.

In Hikari-chan’s hands was a black bikini. Were that all there was to its description, I could have perceived it as a sexy, daring choice. But no, the problem here was the surface area. The chest contained barely enough material to cover what was legally required, while the bottom was less of a T-back and more of a plain old string with just enough cloth to barely cover one’s privates.

This... Ah, yes, my brain finally caught up with the reality before me. Right,

this was what I understood to be one of those micro bikinis, and a rather extreme one at that. Not something made to be worn at that Totally Normal Beach, no sirree.

“This swimsuit is amazing! The person this was made for must have valued hydrodynamics to the absolute extreme and removed all the cloth they could! But... Hm? Wouldn’t something like this slide around more easily?”

And right now, Hikari-chan was hanging that swimsuit in front of her and lining it up with her body...

Whuh, whuh, whuh, whuh...

“Why, yooooooooou!!! Cut that ooout!!!”

I found myself raising my voice as I snatched away the swimsuit. I was starting to understand what kind of support Aiko-san was talking about. Why did this store even *have* swimsuits like this, anyway?

“And then we made it to the station and went our separate ways.”

“Maaan, talk about fun! Let’s totally hang out again! Maybe we could do something with all of third gen?”

“Good idea, that’d definitely be fun.”

: teetee

: Good stuff, keep it going!

: heaven is a place on earth

: lmao at the part about Hikari-chan's mysterious rules

: the Hikarules

: It's like when you mess up your math halfway through a problem but still get the right answer

: when's the debut for Hikari-chan's Friend A

There were a few parts along the way that I kept from the audience, such as

Aiko-san's name, but otherwise, I shared just about everything that happened that day with my viewers. I came out of it with a bunch of clothes and a big step forward in my relationship with Hikari-chan, so I had a sense of fulfillment as I closed down the stream.

Idle Talk: Chami Yanagase Answers Castellas

“Good evening. ≡ It’s Chami Yanagase-oneesan, always the one who guides you to the pinnacle of healing.”

Dripping into the stream’s microphone was a voice with an amorous allure, yet enough refinement to stay above the waters of indecency, a voice as delicate as the moonlight itself.

The voice’s owner was, as already stated, Chami Yanagase of Live-On’s third generation. She was known for her unpredictable streaming style; the gap between her seductive and screwup sides not only earned her plenty of laughs, but also emphasized her cuteness (and occasionally her creepiness). And while sometimes her unpredictability was intentional, other times it came from her going out of control.

Perhaps the saddest thing you could say of her was that if you wanted to sum up her wide variety of characteristics, you only needed one word: “klutz.” The beauty she was blessed with carried a hint of danger, but when her viewers had to worry about how this girl would have survived if she hadn’t become a streamer, you could say her personality came with a different kind of danger.

She had one of the largest hardcore fanbases in Live-On, and her live viewership numbers were as reliable as such things got. Tonight was yet another night where plenty of viewers were visiting her stream.

“Tonight, I’d like to answer some Castellas. Tee hee, I really do get these every day. It’s adorable how you all want to know so much about li’l old me.”

: Thanks for the answers!

: ur qt ¥610

: How strange, I have this burning desire to object, and yet I still don't have anything to object to. How curious.

“Now then, on to the first question.”

Q: Are you making sure that it's water you're putting in your humidifier?

“I mean... Why would you *ask* this? You use humidifiers by putting water in them, right?”

: They think you're that much of a disaster...

: kusa

: Wait, you put water in those to use them? It doesn't automatically humidify when you turn it on?

: where do you think the water comes from

: ^ the one guy who believes the spontaneous generation theory 200 years later

“My, looks like we've got some rude people in here! I'm personally quite sensitive to my throat's condition, so I always run my humidifier to give it the care it needs. And the humidifier I use is a pretty good one, tee hee.”

: Huh, you put in that much work.

: the voice fetishist, ladies and gentlemen

: Sorry, I didn't think you had one, I figured you'd accidentally buy a sauna instead.

: okay now THAT was mean

“If anything, I *love* my humidifier. It sort of makes me feel like I'm not alone.”

: Um?

: ???

: Uh, Chami-chan, what are you saying again?

“Oh, you don’t know what I’m talking about? I figure it’s a little different for every model, but when I fill up the tank and turn mine on, I hear it move water from the tank to the tray every few hours. And it’s sorta like this pulsing sound. When I hear it, I just think, ‘Ah, my cute little guy’s still working hard,’ you know?”

: ¿¿¿???

: You sure your loneliness hasn't warped you into treating your humidifier as a pet?

: all of my kusa

: You got the "water" part, but the "using it" part went off the rails!

: i want to be reincarnated as chami-chan's pet humidifier

“Huh?! Come on, you all get the warm fuzzies when you feed the tank water, don’t you?”

: No, see, you're not supposed to be "feeding" it

: i absolutely don't lmao

: Love how you're insane in a completely different way from Shuwa-chan

: Did Shuwa-chan do something with a humidifier?

: I heard she tried pouring StroZero in the tank and wound up breaking it.

: bruh

: How does someone even think to do that...

: I think she said she wanted to immerse her room in StroZero flavor so she could ingest it through her nose

: The Woman Who Was Humiliated by a Humidifier

: It's the manufacturer's fault, they should've had a warning sign that told people not to put StroZero in the humidifier.

: bro they're not gonna imagine people would do that.

“See? There’s lots to love about humidifiers!”

Q: You always seem pretty tame, Chami-chan, but have you gotten mad at anything lately?

“Hmm, good question, but first, I’d rather you call me ‘calm and collected’ instead of ‘tame.’”

: Yeah, yeah

: fair enough

: Wow chami-chaaan, ur so collected and coooooool

“Is it just me, or are you all making fun of me?! W-Well, fine, but let me think... Oh, there’s one thing I got mad at the other day! For real, I was *not* having it!”

: Huh, didn't expect that.

: Ooh, she sounds *pissed*

: What'd someone do to manage to get you angry, Chami-chan?

“So you see, the other day, I wanted to do some research on how to improve my ASMR quality, so I was listening to a ton of ASMR creators all over YouTube. And then, well, I called it research, but my ears were just met with such bliss that I started getting drowsy. And just then...it happened.”

: What did?

: Hold up, what's this about?

: i am excite

“I’d like you all to experience the shock for yourselves, so imagine yourselves listening to some ASMR as you’re drifting off to sleep. I’ll reenact the ASMR lines.”

: ok

: you betcha

“Ready? Well then, here I go.” *ahem*

After Chami cleared her throat, she started reading the line aloud.

“How is it? Does it hurt? It’s my first time cleaning ears and all... Ooh, I’m a little scared... Hm? You like it? Well, that’s good to hear. Eh heh heh... Hmm, I’m just, like, a little scared of the dark, and your ears are so dark in there that I can’t see... Oh, I know, do you mind if I put on my glasses? Yeah, glasses. My vision’s not that bad, but I put them on if I need to see any fine details around the house. Is that okay? Ah, thanks. Umm, let me just put my glasses
oooOOOOOOOOOLD SPICE BODY WAAAAAAAASH!!!!!”

: WTF?!

: I got shook...

: Where'd that come from?!

: loooool she just dropped an ad lmfaoooo

: Yep, I get it lol

: **Outstanding performance fee ¥10,000**

“Yeah, an ad! I had my earbuds in at high volume, so I was so surprised I jumped! I said you could put on glasses, but I didn’t say a *word* about selling me body soap! I stayed mad about it the whole time!”

: It's cute how that's the part she gets angry over.

: only in Live-On can these borderline cypypasta stories happen in real life

: What?! Old Spice is too powerful to be contained in its own commercial! Sixteen hours of ear cleaning ASMR poweeeeeeeeer!

: please stop, nobody wants to hear that

: He'd probably shout "BLOCK" every time he got some earwax out.

: Or he'd shout "G000000AL" as he pierced your eardrums.

: Red card!

“Please, give me a break! I’m sick of talking about it already! Ooooooooh!”

: don't do the "oooooooh"

: sounds like a success as far as PR goes.

: Gotta make sure your product leaves an impression.

“I’m getting annoyed here, so we’re done talking about this! On to the next Castella!”

Q: Nice job during Amidst Us! If you'd like, could you share your thoughts about it? Also, I'm really looking forward to your off-collab with Ehrai-chan!

“Thank you for the Castella. Ah, *Amidst Us*, I was just thinking that I wanted to share my thoughts about it! Ah, but there'll be some spoilers, so if anyone here hasn't watched that stream and doesn't want the surprises spoiled, I'm sorry, but could I ask you to mute the stream for a bit?”

: Don't worry!

: Fine here!

: That stream was legendary, so go watch it, everyone!

“Hm... Okay, I'll start talking. Really, it was a lot of fun, but that game is bad for my heart! I thought I was gonna pass out when I saw that I got Imitator on the first round! Why'd it have to start with *me*, of all people?!”

: Not the imitator not the imitator not the imitator not the imitatooooor?!?!

: ^ literally Chami-chan back then lmao

: I lol'd when I saw that get clipped with the title of "Chami-chan gets the Imitator role she always dreamed of!"

: """"always dreamed of""""

: I don't think anyone who heard that shriek thought you'd end up being the MVP

: only thing harder to predict was what the Boss did at the end

“My shyness picked a weird time to come in handy. Though it didn't work on Hikari-chan... Hikari's just too pure for that, so it figures that underestimating

her backfired. Then again...I did feel a little happy that she noticed me, tee hee. I got to make friends with Ehrai-chan too, so once it was all over, I felt glad that I got Imitator.”

: teetee

: lol at how it turned into a superpower battle for exactly one person

: **Congrats! ¥1,000**

: I'm excited for the off-collab with Ehrai-chan too!

: The Boss really is The Boss

“Right, the collab! Our plans have gotten pretty much settled by now! I’m excited too! But, man... Ehrai-chan was so *dashing* back then... Whew...”

: Yep, that voice sounds down bad

: Wait, you've got a crush?

: Smelling another hint of danger here lol

“I-I wouldn’t go *that* far! Look, I’ll be a good senpai and take the lead for her during the collab, just you watch! Tee hee, who knows? Maybe Ehrai-chan’s the one who’s got a crush on *me*?”

: Yeah, yeah lol

: Heck yeah, sounds like we'll get to see the collab sooner than I thought!

Chami continued to answer the rest of the Castellás after this, but her mind lingered on her collab with Ehrai the whole time. She was like a gentle flower bud: hesitant, yet carrying big hopes for the future.

The shy little Chami had obtained a wonderful bond with her kouhai. Could Chami be a good role model for Ehrai and deepen their relationship?

The day following this stream, the date of the Ehrai and Chami off-collab was officially announced...

Chapter 3: There's Something Strange About Chami-chan...

"Any minute now..."

It was ten at night, a time I'd normally be streaming at. I was lying down in my futon, rolling around from an excitement I couldn't contain as I kept my eyes glued to my smartphone's screen.

I hadn't taken the day off from streaming, of course—I front-loaded my entire streaming schedule and even signed off early. The reason why was displayed right on my phone's screen: the waiting room for Chami-chan's next stream.

The stream's title was "ASMR Off-Collab with Ehrai-chan!" Yes, the collab they'd promised during that *Amidst Us* stream was finally becoming a reality.

My shy little Chami-chan worked up all her courage to ask for this offline meetup... I was excited to see how Chami-chan would interact with her kouhai in person, but also worried because I knew she was bound to scuff something up hard along the way. I couldn't sit still in the face of all that, so I just *had* to watch live.

Given that this was an ASMR stream, I was curled up in my futon and wearing my earphones as I waited for it to start, but it went without saying that I wasn't drowsy in the slightest. I could almost hear the sound of my own racing heart. At this point, I was practically a mom watching her kid at a field day. Kaeru-chan? Never heard of her.

"Oh! It started!"

The screen finally showed some movement.

The stream is on, Chami-chan! I'm rooting for you!

"W-Wait a sec..."

The avatars for the two of them were shown on-screen and their expressions were moving, but for some reason, I wasn't hearing any of their voices. Oh no,

was this the dreaded technical issue?! Or was it a problem on YouTube's end?

"Er, pardon..."

Even I had gotten a little anxious over the stream's rocky start, but hearing Ehrai-chan's voice put me at ease. It sounded like they were still using a regular mic instead of an ASMR mic.

"H-Heya, everyone~! Are you all doing good~? I am~! Thanks for waiting. I'm Ehrai Sonokaze, zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo!"

: Boss! We've been expecting you!

: Heyakuza, Boss!

: Heyakuza, a perfect greeting for our Boss who charges straight to the top of the yakuza underworld! I'm in manly tears!

: **I present today's tribute, Boss. ¥50,000**

: "tribute" lmao

: What're the rest of ya waitin' for?! Pay up already if ya don't wanna get fed to the lion!

: love how the Boss's viewers came up with this weird super culture and made her the org's top earner despite the Boss never telling chat to do any of that

Given the pairing for this collab, the live viewer count was already nuts. It was the sort of number that would get me *stressed* if I were in their shoes. Fortunately, Ehrai-chan had a pretty good head on her shoulders, so Chami-chan was in her capable hands!

Or so I prayed, my hands clasped as I awaited Chami-chan's grand entrance...but, uh, huh? The audio went silent again, you guys...

"Um~... Chami-senpai? I think it's about time for your greeting~! Especially when we planned for the senpai here to go first~!"

: Chami-chaaan, anyone there?

: looks like she's still being shy lol

: Chammying it up again

: Guess she really is nervous over her first off-collab with a kouhai.

: Please, Zookeeper, help her out!

“Er, no, I don’t think this is a shyness issue...”

Looking at the comments made me worried that the worst had come to pass, but with the way Ehrai-chan was acting, it felt like the circumstances were a bit different here.

“Um, Chami-senpai? The stream’s already started, so I’d really like for you to do your greeting already~!”

“Oh, Ehrai-chan, you’re so cool...”

“No, see, that’s not the point here...”

Hm? I thought.

“Chami-senpai, the greeting, okay?”

“Just call me Chami, okay? No need to be so stiff around me.”

“No, I mean, I want to show respect to my senpai, so... Look, that passionate gaze isn’t going to change my mind... Also, can you listen to me and do the greeting?”

“Mmmmmmmgh~~~, Ehrai-chan~~~!”

“Um, hugging me won’t change it either...”

: BRUH?!

: asdfkljfdakl

: What the heck is going on?!

: Where'd that come from?!

: i did not see this coming

Both I and the entire chat were so shocked that our collective brain cell couldn't keep up with what was happening.

I needed a break to assess the situation. This was the first collab between these two since they got to know each other during *Amidst Us*, and it was an offline collab at that. When the stream finally began, the otherwise disastrously shy Chami-chan skipped her introduction, flirted with Ehrai-chan in a sultry voice, and hugged her, with Ehrai-chan herself just shrugging at how to respond.

All right, situation assessed. And it still made zero sense!

Crap, my mind was seriously getting scrambled. And after all of its fidgeting earlier, my body was now stiff as a board. What eventually came was a waterfall of cold sweat.

Even though I was curled up under the covers, the bad feeling I had about this stream was chilling me to the bone. Desperate to escape it, I managed to drag my fingers over the screen and punch in a comment.

Awayuki Kokorone: Did you fuck?

"Now that I can assure you didn't happen, so don't worry~!"

: Awayuki-chan

: The Woman Who Looked like an Ice-Type but Was Really a Kusa-Type

: So, Abomasnow?

: Aww, you didn't?

Ehrai-chan's calm comeback had me a little relieved, but the largest mystery still went unsolved: What had happened to make Chami-chan start acting like a

completely different person? And what was going to happen here?

“Ah, Awayuki-chan! Hey, hey, listen! So today, I became Ehrai-chan’s woman!”

“Chami-senpai?!”

This time, my fingers flew with an awesome power, like a smartphone version of Shining Finger.

Awayuki Kokorone: Can I make an appointment for a breastfeeding session?

: please stop reading so far ahead

: lmao @ how she already assumes she's pregnant

: A dead straight fireball followed by a wild curveball, she's pitching like Christopher Robin out here.

Mashiro Irodori: I don't know if you're Awa-chan or Shuwa-chan, but settle down, fella

“Wha?!” I blurted out.

R-Right, my job here was to watch over them! What was I doing turning my brain off and rattling out sex jokes when I wasn’t even drunk?!

I’d been noticing lately that I had a habit of running away into Shuwa-chan’s personality whenever something too out of the ordinary happened. Something to watch out for.

Hikari Matsuriya: Chami-chan, you became Ehrai-chan's woman? Whaddya mean?

Oh, Hikari was here too. The whole third gen gang was here. Guess we were all worried about Chami-chan.

“Um, this whole ‘becoming my woman’ thing is a bit of a misunderstanding... Chami-senpai, could you please explain to everyone how it happened~?”

“Good idea... It all started when we played Amidst Us together.”

Chami-chan sounded like she was sharing one of her most cherished memories.

“Ehrai-chan and I became Imitators together... We may have lost, but I was so happy to see her treat a screwup like me as a dear partner to the bitter end.”

I see, it all made perfect sense to me now. After all, I was here because of how impressed I was that Chami-chan had put aside her fears and invited Ehrai-chan to an off-collab back then.

“And then, for some reason, ever since that Amidst Us collab, whenever I thought of Ehrai-chan, the racing of my heart just wouldn’t stop. I thought it was just my nerves at first...but actually, when I met Ehrai-chan today, there was a bit of an incident, and that’s when I realized—”

“Y-You’re telling them about that part too?!”

“Of course! So then, I figured that Ehrai-chan didn’t know the way to my house, so we decided that I’d meet her at a nearby station and I’d show her the way. But I couldn’t be late, you know, and I overthought it a bunch, so I showed up a lot earlier than we planned, right? So I was just standing there waiting by the station...but then, these guys came over, and I guess they thought I was free, so they started hitting on me...”

Ahhhh... Now that was a scene I could imagine in vivid detail... Chami-chan had the unfortunate combination of looking mature at a glance and having her head in the clouds, so I could imagine that strangers talked to her pretty often, even when it *wasn’t* to hit on her.

“At times like these, I’d normally run away at full speed, but I couldn’t leave since Ehrai-chan was just about to arrive, so I was just reeling over how panicked I was getting... And I guess that made the guys think I’d say yes if they kept pushing, so they just kept going, and my mind was just blanking out.”

“U-Umm~, I think most of our audience can more or less imagine how this story ends, so perhaps we could leave it at that~?”

“What’re you talking about, this is the best part! So listen, everyone, listen! Just then, you see, a single woman came right over, took my hand and held it

right to her chest, and then said this—

“Ah, ah, aaaaaall you bozos better lop off yer ears right now! Boss’s ordeeeeeers!” Ehrai-chan interrupted, but to no avail.

“She said, ‘Sorry, but this here is my woman.’ Squee!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!!! I didn’t say that! I did not say that, and I wasn’t trying creepily hard to sound like a cocky playboy when I did!”

“You did too say it! I’d even say you were like a thousand times cooler than you are now!”

Ah, yes. So, in other words...

Awayuki Kokorone: It sounds like the time that I first met StroZero!

: Um?

Mashiro Irodori: Um?

: we know you're strozero but it's too early for you to fall flat

: "we know" since when lmao

: lmao @ Ehrai-chan bringing the Boss out

Awayuki Kokorone: I haven't even been drinking tonight...

: I think it's scarier that you came up with that sober

“And that was the moment I realized. This racing of my heart was because I wanted to become Ehrai-chan’s woman.”

“Looking back, deciding to meet at the station was my biggest mistake... If I had just asked you to send me your address, you might not have become so far gone...”

“Tee hee, the way you knew it was me when you saved me from those guys has to be a sign that we’re meant to be.”

“Oh no, that was just because I knew we’d be meeting up there, and I could tell from a glance that you were the only person who’d be that antsy, so...”

“Mmmmmgh~, squiiiiiiish!!!”

“S-Someone, I’d very much like some assistance here~!”

: cute

: Chami-chama's easy to impress, huh

: No, our Boss is just THAT cool.

: If I were in that situation, I can't imagine myself *not* falling for her

Hikari Matsuriya: Oh, I get it! It means that you're good friends now!

“Why, yes, it sure does,” Chami-chan cooed.

“Oh no, your sense of personal space is still bugging out! A shy person is not supposed to be this touchy their first time meeting someone face-to-face!”

“Well, you do have a point... But I just have this sense of comfort around you, like you’d accept me no matter what. I can usually keep how touch-starved I normally am in check, but around you, it just goes out of control.”

“Now that’s what people mean when they say you’re easy to impress~!”

“Does that mean...I can’t hug you?”

“Ooh... Don’t give me that look... Well, I suppose hugging is innocent enough, so...”

“Hooray!”

: Looks like they're a good match.

: Ehrai-chan's got a big heart. That's why she's the Boss!

: I love that we keep finding out just how much rizz Ehrai-chan has.

: The Boss seems like she'll get stabbed somewhere down the line, for a number of reasons...

Awayuki Kokorone: You got married? To someone other than me?

Mashiro Irodori: Maybe she trusted you at first and just realized later on that she was at risk of being a crime victim?

Awayuki Kokorone: Rude!

“Um, just so we’re clear, I didn’t have any input over what Chami-senpai’s saying, so I had no intention of marrying her or even being lovers!”

“Yes, yes, and that’s just fine. I’m fine with being the equivalent to your younger brother, your aide, or even your mic.”

“I think I heard something strange in there... I really don’t understand what ‘mic’ was supposed to mea—oooh~! This intro’s gone on for too long! It’s about time we started the ASMR stream that the people came here for~!”

Ehrai-chan changed the subject by force. But with things already so far off the rails, could they even *do* a normal stream?



“Look, Chami-senpai! You were supposed to teach me ASMR, right? I’d prefer you stop clinging to me and get set up already!”

“Awww... But will you say nice things to me if I get set up?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll give you all the compliments you want~. You just have to be a big girl for now~.”

“Okaaay... I’ll go get the equipment, then.”

Ehrai-chan was managing to avert my worst fears by saying just the right things to Chami-chan to keep her in line. She sure knew how to adapt.

Chami-chan, I thought, you still have time to turn this stream back into something sensible! Keep it together, girl!

: they got the seniority here totally flipped

: Chami-chan couldn't be a good role model to a grade schooler

Hikari Matsuriya: Good timing for me too! It's bathroom time!

: Come back safe, now.

: guess I'll go to the bathroom too

: Come back safe, now.

: All right, I think I'll go jack off then.

: Cum back safe, n--oh shut up already

Mashiro Irodori: Remember, Awa-chan, not everyone needs to know.

Awayuki Kokorone: Why me?!

: Imma level with ya, Awayuki-chan, drunks should zip it and go to the toilet

Awayuki Kokorone: For real, why am I the bad guy here?! And I'm not even drinking!

“So for today~, Chami-senpai will be introducing me to a rather high-end ASMR microphone~! It’s actually one of those dummy-head ones, which I hear is an all-black model of an entire human head with microphones in the ears~! Having something like that in her own home really speaks to Chami-senpai’s professional standards for her audio~!”

Ahh, I remembered there being something like that when Chami-chan had showed me her collection the last time I visited her house. But this was good—if Ehrai-chan could steer Chami-chan back to bestowing the arcane secrets of ASMR upon her, then they could make it through the stream without the stated goal falling apart! Now, Chami-chan, cast aside the errors of your past!

“Ah, she’s returned~. Welcome back, Chami-senp—”

“Aihf hack, Fehrai-fhan (I’m back, Ehrai-chan)! He’e ahw hreahii ooh ho (We’re all ready to go)!”

“.....”

“Kuhn how, Fehrai-fhan (Come now, Ehrai-chan)! Horr yor fweed, foohifooh hiffhuhz ihoo fiff maif, ih hyoog freej (Pour your sweet, beautiful whispers into this mic, if you’d please)!”

“Hwoooo...”

Chami-chan had returned with a scampering of her feet. But the voice that came with her was a far cry from the ultra-high-fidelity angelic serenades I knew her for; instead, it sounded like her mouth was blocked off by something, and her voice was so muffled that it was hard to even make out what she was saying. Ehrai-chan should have been able to tell what was going on given that she was right there, but she wasn’t saying a word. All she did was take a deep, long breath.

But you see, the almost full year I’d spent among the chaos that was Live-On had corrupted me in body and soul. That limited information was enough to curse me with the idea of just what was going on.

And no, “curse” was no exaggeration.

Chami-chan... I pleaded to myself. Ahhh... No... Chami-chan...

“Whaffa ma’er, Fehrai-fhan (What’s the matter, Ehrai-chan)? Geh kroh ooh uh mih (Get close to the mic)! Kroh ehuh fat yer rihs airly tuh (Close enough that your lips barely touch)! Eh hrai ih wih uh faibrei’uhs uh yer froah’s mu’er am ti’yoo (And strike it with the vibrations of your throat’s muscle and tissue)!”

“Er... Folks at home, I have a question I’d like to ask you all~.”

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!”

“If your senpai leaves to go get a mic, but instead returns wearing a pair of black pantyhose over her face while panting like a pervert, what would be the correct course of action~?”

Chami-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!!!! I screamed internally.

: kusa

: So Chami-chan became the mic herself.

: is THAT what happened? lmao

: So she wants to make her dream come true that badly!

: I think that calls for some slapstick lol

That absolute idiot! Right when she had a chance to put the stream back on track, she went and let her urges take over! There was no way anyone would mistake your pantyhose-covered head for a dummy-head mic!

“All right now, Chami-senpai! Stop being silly and go get the mic ready! I’m taking that pantyhose off right this minute~!”

“Fehrai-fhan, duh pooh oh hose (Ehrai-chan, don’t pull on those)! Mah hehhz harih ohh (My head’s tearing off)! Eye humma hurr i’oo uh yuuhhurri (I’m gonna turn into a yukkuri)!”

Hikari Matsuriya: That looks fun! I wanna put pantyhose on my head and get into a tug-of-war with Chami-chan!

Mashiro Irodori: I don't think that's recommended for ages 3 and under.

: Pioneering new depths for the VTuber world to stoop to.

: They're professionals, all right. Professional comedians.

Plop!

**pant, pant...* "Huh, Ehrai-chan?"*

"Hm? What could be the matter?"

"I, I tried my best, so tell me something nice."

"I'll smack you."

"Aaaaaaaaah! That edge to your voice was so good! Say it one more time, right up close to my ear!"

"She's a goner... I'd very much like to go home already... Enough of that, now go get that mic! If anything, I'll go with you!"

Ehrai-chan's voice faded out with Chami-chan's as she tried to salvage what was left of the plan.

My vision drifted away from the now-silent stream and I stared up at the ceiling while a bright, carefree smile stretched across my face.

Ah, I thought, this stream is screwed!

"Huh? You mean we're already doing ASMR?"

"Yeah, this is already ASMR. But talking normally might make our viewers' ears ring, so be sure to whisper softly."

Now that Ehrai-chan had managed to get Chami-chan's outbursts under control, it seemed the mic was finally set up. I could hear their voices and the sounds of their room captured in that delicate sort of audio quality that ASMR was known for.

Normally, these ASMR mics were best listened to while relaxed and with your eyes closed, but this was one stream where I couldn't let my guard down for a

moment. Why, you ask? Well...

“Ahh, ahhh, can you hear me? It’s Zookeeper Ehrai here~.”

“AaaaAAaAAAaAAAHH I can hear yooooou!!! It’s passing through my eardrums into my brain to get dispersed throughout my entire nervous systeeeeeeeem!!!!!”

“Pipe down, will yaaaaa?! Could you please recall what you said just five seconds ago~?!”

That was why. Right now, Chami-chan was left totally blind due to her love (?) for Ehrai-chan. She was a perverted, voice-fetishizing screwup whose every move was impossible to predict. I had to keep my eyes glued to the screen and expect the unexpected.

: My ears are ringing. Thanks for providing a helpful example.

Hikari Matsuriya: I got surprised... Impressive, Chami-chan! I didn't know you could launch an attack through audio alone! That's so cool!

: Chami-chan's shout shook me, but the Boss's whispering voice had me shaking... I felt like someone had a knife aimed at my back.

: spine-tingling (out of fear) ASMR, lmao

: Her soothing voice actually makes it scarier... Thank you for saving us, Chami-chan...

“Really, I haven’t the faintest idea as to why so many people in the chat are taking Chami-chan’s side here~...”

pant, pant... “Ehrai-chan, you’re a bad girl. When you speak so seductively...it makes me want to take you right here.”

“I’ll have you know that I can hold my own in a fight. Would you still like to try me?”

“So you’re saying you’d be the one to take me? By all means, with a helping of

insults while you're at it!"

"Do I look like I'm running a ramen stand to you? Really, I'd much prefer to go about this collab with her mouth taped shut~!"

: Yeah, that's right! The boss might be a *bad* guy, but she's not a *bad* *guy*!

: she's got chami-chan saying lines that didn't even come from the show

: Ehrai-chan knowing how to fight fits so perfectly lmao

: I bet it's not even self-defense, she means she knows how to brawl

: I can see her tossing someone's face through a microwave door

"Oh, phooey, this is no time for dunks, I have to focus on keeping this stream on track... Er, we'll begin with the eating sounds~! Chami-senpai! Get that ready for us!"

"You got it! I picked out the perfect snacks! I'll be right back!"

"Really, these are the moments she chooses to be a hard worker? What a handful..."

Eating sounds, huh? Now that she mentioned it, I thought I'd heard that Chami-chan did those every now and then.

Eating sounds picked up by an ASMR mic tended to come across as pretty NSFW. They'd normally get my heart racing...but this time, I just had a bad feeling about what was going to happen next.

"I'm back! I got the stuff! Look, it's mitarashi dango!"

"Well now~, I see! That certainly seems like it could produce some fine sounds~!"

"Put this up close to the mic and try taking a big bite of it!"

“Why, I certainly will! Now, don’t mind if I do~.”

When Ehrai-chan put her mouth around the dumpling and chewed it around, I heard a sound that words fail me to describe beyond the fact that it made my face turn beet red. With how much audio their mic was picking up, I couldn’t imagine anyone possibly eating quietly or cautiously enough to be spared from its range.

I felt almost emotional that this stream was finally getting remotely into ASMR territory, but no good thing can ever last...

pant! pant! sluurp! “Ahaaaaahhhhh...” pant! pant! “I can’t get enooough!”

Hearing the ragged breaths of the pervert right next to Ehrai-chan made my beet-red face go pale, so I typed in a comment before I knew it. What was she doing getting in the way of someone’s ASMR when she was supposed to be the teacher here?

Awayuki Kokorone: Hey, someone tell that degenerate disaster to shut up! I can't hear Ehrai-chan's mouth over her!

Mashiro Irodori: A stuck-up, short-fused, self-proclaimed seiso sex criminal, how scary.

: And the savage inter-gen roasts are flying in!

: lmao @ telling someone to shut up *during ASMR*

: I liked how Chami-chan said "I can't get enooough"

“R-Right, Awayuki-chan. I wouldn’t want any noise getting in the way of Ehrai-chan’s eating sounds either, so I’ll cover my mouth and do my best to hold it in! Ehrai-chan, try again, please!”

“That I will~! Ahmph!” munch, munch...

“!!!!!!”

“Mm, heh heh, this feels...a bit embarrassing... Okay! I’ve finished eating~! You may take your hands off now~!”

pant... pant... pant... pant... “Hey, Ehrai-chan.”

“Hm? What is it~?”

“So...wanna do it? ♥”

“I do not?! How the hell do you get turned on by watching your kouhai eat a dumpling, ya dimwiiiiiiiiit?!”

“Oh, right, clippers! I wanna run that on repeat, so make some clips of Ehrai-chan’s eating sounds right there, okay?”

“Huh?!”

: On it.

: Custom-order clips, lmao

Hikari Matsuriya: Eating sounds are good? Why's that?

Mashiro Irodori: Watching people enjoy a nice meal makes you feel good too, right? It's basically that.

Hikari Matsuriya: Oh, I get it!

: Nice save, Mashiron

: Why do I get the feeling that Mashiron's like third gen's guardian...

: Mashiron-mama?! It's me! My tummy hurty, can you burp me pretty please?

: Mama Mashiron! Mamamamama Mashiron!
Mamamamamamamamamama

After the eating sounds came the heartbeat sounds...

“Uh, Ehrai-chan, could you take your top off a bit and put the mic against your chest?”

“Take off my top?! You want me to expose my chest?! Don’t go taking advantage of the stream just to get me naked, you pervert!”

“Well, if you put the mic against your clothes, the sounds of them ruffling will get in the way. I’m not saying to let it all hang out, you can just loosen the neck a bit. I’ll have my eyes closed too, so how about it?”

“I’ll believe that when I...well, I suppose I would see it.”

“If you were to ask me whether I do or do not want to see your chest, then I would have to answer that I do, but heartbeat sounds matter more! Ehrai-chan, I want to hear your very sign of being alive!!!”

“Your bloodshot eyes have me a bit scared... I can’t tell whether it’s how sound fetishists are or if you’re just especially far gone...”

“Please, hurry up! Ehrai-chan, hurry up and let me hear your most precious sound!”

“Ew, gross.”

Ehrai-chan had her complaints, but it seemed like she’d settled on going through with it. I could hear the sounds of rustling clothes.

Nice job, Chami-chan, I thought, a fact I’d prefer to keep secret.

“Okay, I’m putting it against me.”

“Please, go ahead.”

After a bit of silence, the right earphone that I’d been hearing Ehrai-chan in was now making a series of deep thumps, each one sounding as forceful as a bass drum. It was by no means a quiet sound, but maybe it was human nature to find it incredibly relaxing. Its tempo sounded...a bit fast.

“Whoa, it’s so embarrassing to hear how fast my heart rate is... Maybe it’s just the nerves from doing something new...”

“Ahhh, so goooood... It’s cute how your heart is trying so hard to spurt its little blood everywhere...”

“Guh?! You sounded so much like a serial killer that I thought my heart would stop!”

: I'm just glad her heart doesn't sound like gunshots.

It's nice to know our Boss actually is a human being.

: I had a joke lined up about how there was a turf war going on inside her body, but now I'm sad that I can't use it.

: **Cells at Work? more like Cells at War. ¥10000**

: Her red and white blood cells would be fighting for their lives out there

: Red and white teams? What is this, a field day?

: watching blood rushing in more ways than one

: lmao @ how none of you considered your zookeeper human

: I think of her as the personification of terror.

: lmfao at how Chami-chan's psycho word choice made her heart stop for a second and *then* start speeding up

: bet finding a kindred spirit made her heart skip a beat

: It really is calming, though. I know she gets called the Boss a lot, but I really do feel some mama-ness from Ehrai-chan.

: i imagined myself being pushed against those cowtits and got a boner

: If we can hear this sound so clearly through a chest of her size, would we get an even clearer sound from Mashiro-chan?

Mashiro Irodori: Excuse me? Your name's goin' on my shitlist, bud.

Awayuki Kokorone: Mashiron, let's settle down here...

Hikari Matsuriya: I'm gonna do push-ups in time with her heartbeat!

: We don't need the stream *and* the chatbox to be cursed lol

: Well, they don't call her the Voice Sex Illusionist for nothing. Meisters are just a cut above the rest.

Hikari Matsuriya: gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah my
aaaaaaaaaaaaaarm!!!!

Wait, was Chami-chan even okay?! She wasn't having a heart attack, right?!

"I got a little too turned on by your heartbeat sounds, Ehrai-chan. I totally feel like puking right now."

"C-C-C-C-Calm down now, Chami-senpai! You'll turn into Awayuki-senpai if you throw up on stream! Right, deep breaths! Breathe iiiiin, breathe oooooout!"

Awayuki Kokorone: You'll...become Awayuki-senpai? Become Awayuki...

Mashiro Irodori: Aww, it's (lol) okay

Hikari Matsuriya: I'm burnt out...into pure, white ash...

Awayuki Kokorone: Rude. Also Hikari, what the heck have you been up to...

: Yep, Live-On's still Live-On.

At this point, it was less an ASMR stream and more an ASMR-themed comedy skit. The stream continued with Chami-chan refusing to step on the brakes as she drove Ehrai-chan and all of the viewers absolutely nuts.

"I-I believe that covers everything we planned to do, so all that's left is to wrap the stream up... I don't believe I've ever had such an exhausting stream before~!"

"It'd be a crime not to continue! Get it? Crime boss?"

sigh... "I do believe it would be best to end this stream before Chami-senpai embarrasses herself any further~."

"C'moon, that was a good one! Gimme some props!"

“I’m afraid that you didn’t do a single thing Ehrai-ght this entire evening, so no~.”

It sounded like the stream was winding down.

If I had to pin down the most impactful thing I got out of this stream, it was watching Chami-chan show a level of energy from start to finish that I’d never seen from her before. If I hadn’t known about her sound and voice fetishes beforehand, I wouldn’t have believed she was the same person.

I was on edge at the start of the stream, her rampage giving me a sense of danger. But my mind changed as the stream went on; strangely, I started thinking the whole thing was pretty endearing. The same Chami-chan I knew had stopped caring about her shyness and her screwups to focus wholeheartedly on Ehrai-chan. It was kind of a refreshing change of pace, but still pretty in line with her personality, so at the end of the day, you felt like it was still Chami-chan.

By the latter half of the stream, I was having a blast in chat like any other viewer would. I’d said that I felt like a mother watching her child at a field day before the stream started, but the fuzzies I felt now could probably be compared to that mother watching her child get a little too into the game, but still have a good time; she’d give an obligatory shrug to show others how much of a handful her child was, but inside, she’d be bursting with joy.

“Heeey, pleeease, I don’t want the stream to eeend! I wanna hear you make so many more sounds, Ehrai-chan!”

“Ah, hold it! Stop clinging to my stomach! I-I can’t breathe...”

“Geh heh heh, I can hear the sounds inside your tummy... I-I love iiit!”

“Hey now! Is that what you were after?! Goodness, you really need to be disciplined!”

“Ugh gaaahhhgggghh?! Ehrai-chan! I give! I give!”

“Yes, very well. Now then, do you feel bad about what you did?”

pant, pant “N-Not a bit!”

“Huh?”

“I know I gave in a second ago, but that hold you put me in felt kinda good! Discipline me more!”

“And now you’re a masochist? I don’t think your viewers will be able to keep up if you add too many fetishes.”

The two had already started flirtily (?) joking at each other again.

Chami-chan certainly took the spotlight, but I couldn’t forget about everything Ehrai-chan brought to the table. Catching her previous streams always reminded me that she was an absolute genius at streaming, and this time was no different.

While Chami-chan’s unpredictable behavior had Ehrai-chan just as baffled at the start as I was, she learned to expect the unexpected as time went on. By taking a back seat to her out-of-control partner, she drew out this newfound depth to Chami-chan’s personality and gave herself plenty of material to crack jokes over, allowing her to change the stream’s course from its planned ASMR content to a more comedy-heavy event. Her quips had grown snappier by the end, as exemplified by that YOSHIKI joke, and her superb pacing under these bizarre circumstances made it seem like a walk in the park for her. The fact that she’d managed to exert some control over that form of Chami-chan was downright awe-inspiring. They were touches that you might’ve missed if you weren’t paying attention, but as a fellow streamer, I had a deep respect for her. It looked like she was already falling into the role of the fourth gen’s narrator, so she’d surely grow to be beloved by her audience for many more reasons to come.

If anything, I was sure that Chami-chan had grown so attracted to Ehrai-chan over the course of that *Amidst Us* game because she noticed those qualities in her sooner than the rest of us did. For real, it had to be against some kind of rule to be so caring for your friends and also so cool on top of it. Ehrai-chan was absolutely the type of streamer who got more interesting the more you got to know her.

And now she was getting laughs by breaking her zookeeper character to bring out the yakuza bit. Yeah, being the one who first awakened her crime-boss persona was definitely something I’d be bragging about in the future.

I raised that girl, I thought. Or maybe more like broke her.

“Once again, this will be the end of tonight’s stream! However! I will be staying the night at Chami-senpai’s home~... Hm, perhaps I should leave after all?”

“You can’t! We’re going to take a bath together and sleep together! We’ll deepen our love! And develop our ears!”

“Hmm, I think I’ll go to sleep right away and return home first thing in the morning~.”

“Oh ho ho, I won’t be letting you sleep tonight. Not until you put me to bed first!”

“Ah, being in Live-On has taught me that humans really are nothing but mammals, truly fascinating. Now then, until next time! Bye-bye, everyone~!”

“Boob-bye!”

“Chami-senpai, you were imagining that bath later, weren’t you?”

: Boob-bye!

: I can already see Chami-chan getting roasted next stream

: You know, this Chami-chan's cute too.

: These two have such wide gaps between their looks and their personalities that you could swap their avatars and it'd still work.

: Take care, Boss...

Shy or not, Chami-chan’s sense of personal space was bugged out. I definitely wanted to keep an eye on how their relationship progressed!

Idle Talk: Hikari Matsuriya Answers Castellas

“Konpikaaa, everyone!!! The light of the festival is here for all to enjoy!
llllllllllit’s Hikari Matsuriya! Today, Hikari’s gonna start off by answering some
Castellas!”

- : Konpika!
- : she is HYPE lol
- : First time here? Hikari-chan's always like this.

The person with the loud and lively voice who announced the start of her stream with a perfect greeting was Hikari Matsuriya of Live-On’s third generation.

If you had to sum her up, she was basically a ray of sunshine, just like her namesake. She streamed every day with the excitement of a guest at a festival, and that excitement proved contagious as it spread to her viewers. At first glance, that sort of energy might look like a schtick that any streamer could do, but faked enthusiasm doesn’t last long before cracks start to show. Hikari could pull off her streaming style specifically because she was a hard worker who wore her heart on her sleeve.

Her introduction thus far might make her out to be a wholesome streamer who’d be out of place amidst Live-On’s roster of wackos, so allow me to provide some further detail: She was a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, hard, hard, hard, hard, hard, hard worker who wore her heart on her sleeve.

Rest assured, she was very much Live-On.

Q: Say Vrooooooooooom ≡ L(7^o^)> YAH0000000!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
d=(^o^)=b!

“Sure! Vrooooooooooom $\Xi^L(\gamma^{\wedge o^{\wedge}})$ YAHOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!! d=(^o^)=b...
Is that all?”

: Holy shiiiiit!!!!

: I didn't know it was possible to say that out loud...

: (grizzled veteran voice) "is that all?"

: i clapped when she said "d=(^o^)=b"

Q: I'm curious how you noticed that Chami-chan was there during the Amidst Us stream.

“Hmmm? This one's another strange Castella. After all, Chami-chan *was* right there.”

: it's the kind of superpower she doesn't even realize she has

: She might look airheaded, but she pays attention to what really matters.

: Yeah, it's weirder that nobody *else* noticed Chami-chan.

Q: If you could pick one Live-On streamer to cohabit with, who would it be?

“‘Cohabit,’ right, that means to live together! Hikari learned that one just the other day! All righty, everyone seems like they'd be a fun choice, so Hikari's gotta think...”

: She sorta sounds like she knows what the word means but also sorta doesn't

: She's a wholesome girl, after all...

: **literally a trolley problem ¥1,220**

: kusa

“Huuuh? Why’s that? Well, Sei-sama’s a jolly fella, but Hikari doesn’t understand the stuff she says a lot... But right, if she’s got Shion-senpai, then that’s a no-go. Those two should cohabit together, yeah! Which means out of the second gen, it’d have to be Nekoma-senpai! Nekoma-senpai knows about lots and lots of amazing games that Hikari’s never heard of before! It’d be fun to cohabit with her!”

: """"amazing games""""

: Hikari-chan loves to suffer, so...maybe they're amazing by her standards?

: So Nekomah's got a shot?

: **I can imagine Nekomah bringing out a new kusoge every day and getting shook by Hikari-chan loving them from the bottom of her heart ¥5,000**

: sounds kinda cute

: Nekomah tried pranking her one time by showing her a shitty movie that she claimed was a "hidden gem," and it backfired (?)

: a strange sense of kinship would form

“Next is third gen, Hikari’s genmates, right? Really, Hikari loves all her genmates, so anyone would be fine!”

: Hold up, except one

: You're forgetting about that StroZero

: she'd be ripperoni too

: Arguably the most dangerous *because* she doesn't have a girlfriend

: c'mon, don't treat shuwa-chan like a criminal lmao

“Yeah, that’s right! Awayuki-chan’s a real good girl, you know! She didn’t do anything to Hikari on our date the other day either! Hikari won’t let you bad-mouth her!”

: She really didn't do anything? Like, *really*?

: she seems like the type to take advantage of someone's innocence to plant some bad ideas

: getting a head start on some "obedience training"

“Obedience training? What, like I’m her dog or something? Awayuki-chan wouldn’t do that! If we cohabited together, we could drink together, and it’d be totally fun!”

: No, not like... You know what, actually, yes.

: So, over/under on Shuwa-chan living up to that faith?

: all this when the other two would be no problem lol

“For third gen, Hikari wants to switch who she stays with every day! Last would be fourth gen... Hm? Hikari can’t really imagine anyone, it’s kind of an unknown area... Hikari feels like she’d get along with Alice-chan, maybe?”

: i can see it

: Kaeru-chan wants to be a shut-in, but Hikari-chan would probably drag her out all over

: The Boss is the hardest one to imagine, what does she normally spend her time doing?

: Turf wars, duh

: She said before that nothing calms her down like the scent of blood.

: She never said that lmaooooo

“Hm, hm, okay! Hikari has to pick one out of all these, right? Hikari chooses! Bah duh duh duh duh duh duh, duhn! Nekoma-senpai!”

: Ooooh!

: She does seem pretty chill

: meanwhile it's gonna be the start of a lot of headaches for Nekomah.

“Oh yeah, Hikari wonders how Nekoma-senpai would feel about cohabiting together! Time to send her a message! ‘Nekoma-senpai! How would you feel about cohabiting with Hikari?’ Yeah, that’s perfect! Oops, this is the group chat. Oh, well.”

: Huh?!

: Hikari-chan, phrasing! Phrasing!!!

: That's not a sentence you want everyone reading...

“Whoa! The chat’s going real fast! Huh? Why’s Awayuki-chan yelling about her being a ‘home-wrecker’?! Shion-senpai’s clapping for some reason... Ah, even Nekoma-senpai’s confused for once...”

: Awa-chan, you two were never an item to begin with...

: yeah, there's a reason she's not an option

: Shion-mama's happy to see all of second gen in a relationship

: can't stop laughing at how Nekomah's just an innocent bystander here

: Hikari-chan! Explain the context for them!

“Context? Ahh! Yeah, you’re right! They wouldn’t understand without that, sorry! Let’s see... Yeah, that should do! Hmm... Ah, the group chat’s settling down, thank *goodness!*”

: Good girl.

: Another peaceful day at Live-On.

“Pheew, that was scary... Umm, looks like that one took a bunch of our time, so we’ll leave the Castellas at that and move on to the next topic!”

Hikari’s raw talent kept the viewers entertained until the very end of the stream. After she said her goodbyes and shut down the stream, the first thing Hikari did...was the daily checking of her stats.

“Let’s see, how was today...? Hmm, it kinda feels like Hikari’s subscriber count’s been growing a little slower than last month. Uh, live viewer count dropped by just a little... Ughaaaaahhh, what’re ya doing, Hikarii?!” *sigh* “Next up is Cheeper, Cheeper, yeah, and oh, Hikari got a lot of new followers today! Eh heh heh, that’s a relief! Guess it’s because today’s cheeps went viral. All right! Hikari’s gonna keep things rolling and give everyone a great time tomorrow too!”

Yes, the streamer known as Hikari Matsuriya was a harder worker than anyone. She would push herself and push herself and push herself and keep pushing herself...

“But that doesn’t change the weak growth on Hikari’s streaming numbers, so there’s still plenty to work on! Hikari’s gotta work harder! For the sake of the company that hired her! For the sake of the viewers who keep supporting her! Just you watch, everyone—Hikari’s got plenty more where that came from!

Hikari's gonna work way, way, waaaaay harder to not let you down!"

She would keep pushing herself to an end that not even she could foresee...

Chapter 4: The Breakdown of Hikari-chan

We were all at the same studio we'd used for the lessons leading up to Hareru-senpai's concert. There, we were practicing our singing for one specific part of our planned third-gen anniversary stream, the karaoke segment.

We had already announced to our viewers that we'd be having a sleepover stream for our anniversary. The date was steadily approaching, and we were all getting more and more pumped for it.

Since the plan included all four of us, we called Mashiron out to make the long trip over. Our song set list mostly consisted of covers, but our selections were carefully made so that we'd all shine in our own ways while singing together. So far, things had been progressing pretty smoothly.

Given that this was the only day Mashiron could make it, we wanted to do everything we could during this session to hit a level of quality we were satisfied with. But once we finally started practice, a problem came up.

I didn't have any problems outside of a few minor quibbles—nothing I couldn't solve by the end of the day. Mashiron had a shocking amount of precision and range from the low notes to the highs, so while her homework was to put more emotion into her singing, she clearly had the talent to pull that off. Chami-chan was a bit too quiet when singing, but she managed to conquer that by imagining that Ehrai-chan would be listening. No, the problem was...Hikari-chan.

Of course, there was more to singing skill than just projecting your voice and hitting the right pitch. There was so much more to people than that; plenty of singers out there could move the hearts of their audiences even when they missed a note or went into falsetto. The exact definition of good singing was incredibly vague.

But the way Hikari-chan sang...well, it was going to be hard to get her to harmonize with the rest of us.

She put in every effort to sing, and volume certainly wasn't an issue...but she put in too *much* effort, like a grade schooler singing as hard as they could.

Both Hikari-chan's parts and the whole-group parts just felt out of place from the rest. While we considered changing plans and treating her singing style as an expression of Live-On's individuality, it was Hikari-chan herself who opposed that the most.

"Hikari knows, she really does... Hikari knows she sucks! Just be honest with Hikari!!! We never get a chance to sing together, and Hikari knows the viewers will love it! Hikari can't let her own suckiness ruin it for everyone! Everyone has high hopes for Hikari, but Hikari isn't living up to them! Hikari'll keep trying even if it kills her!"

With that, Hikari-chan was adamant in her refusal, so we tried to respect her wishes and teach her how to relax her throat and stay in tune.

Looking back, she'd probably pushed through with raw energy back when we sang *Live Start* too. I didn't notice a problem back then, partly because it was an upbeat enough song to mask the problem. But she had plenty more singing parts this time on top of a few ballads mixed in, so the issue was finally standing out.

Practice continued, and little by little, we *did* technically see some signs of improvement.

"All right, let's take a break."

"Mmrghh! Hikari's fine, Mashiro-chan! Hikari can keep going!"

"*You* might, Hikari-chan, but the rest of us won't last. Come on, drink some water."

As Mashiron said, we'd been at it for a pretty long time keeping up with Hikari-chan's dedication. Chami-chan and I joined Mashiron in taking a breather to rest our throats.

"But... But Hikari's still not good enough... Hikari has to get a lot better and make her viewers happy..."

"People don't improve through mindless grinding alone."

“Chami-chan... Maybe, but still...”

Hikari-chan was reluctant, but she joined us in taking a break. Her typical streaming style had already made it abundantly clear, but man, she really was a hard worker.

“Hmm... Maybe Hikari should take some serious voice-training lessons... Wait, guess it’s too late for that *now*. Hikari doesn’t have that kind of time, anyway... Does Hikari have enough time to practice? Let’s see, Hikari has a sponsored stream tomorrow, so that’s a stream in the morning, and the next day Hikari has an important recording and a collab stream, and the next day Hikari has to prepare stuff for a game stream...”

“H-Hold on a second!” I hurriedly interjected after listening to Hikari-chan think out loud.

“Oh? What’s up, Awayuki-chan?”

“Could you let me see your schedule for a bit?”

“My schedule? Sure, go ahead!” Hikari-chan turned the smartphone screen with her upcoming schedule toward the rest of us.

What the hell is this? I thought.

Zero. Zip. Zilch. There wasn’t a single gap on here before the anniversary. Her streaming time was on there, of course, but the rest of her schedule was packed to the brim with time slots for everything from prep work to exercise. The only gaps that I could just barely make out were the short ones she reserved for sleep. Even the time she’d spent on the collab between Chami-chan and Ehrai-chan looked like it was just barely scraped up by adjusting her exercise time around it.

Wait... No, there *was* one noticeable gap. It was the time she’d spent with me on that date. It looked like that was opened by scheduling her exercise time around it too, but we spent a *long* time together that day. Even though that time was to help a friend instead of herself, I noticed signs that her schedule had been shifted around that day to the point of having more than a few sleepless nights.

“I...Is your manager not stopping you?” Mashiron and Chami-chan were just

as disturbed by the sight of her schedule as I was.

“Right? Back when Hikari debuted and showed the manager her schedule, Hikari got yelled at and told it wasn’t okay! But Hikari couldn’t stand that, so we talked it out, and this schedule is basically our compromise. Grr, that manager, grrrr!”

“This is a *compromise*... Which means your schedule was packed even *tighter* at the beginning...”

I was practically at a loss for words, but Hikari-chan sounded indignant.

“We were fine until just a little bit ago, but lately Hikari’s been getting yelled at about it being ‘too much’ all over again...”

That got me curious, so I had her show me her schedule from before. While it was still jam-packed, it at least had a little bit of free time to play around in. Her current schedule didn’t even have that. Hikari-chan had more sponsored streams than the rest of us, so I’d always assumed she kept pretty busy, but this? And don’t forget, Hikari-chan’s streams tended to last a *long* time.

“Isn’t...that a little harsh?” I ventured.

“Harsh? Why? Hikari’s viewers support her, and even give her money! Hikari’s viewers are Hikari’s reason to exist, so if anything, it’s not enough! Unlike you all, Hikari doesn’t have any real talents, so if the viewers are still willing to support Hikari, then Hikari’s gotta work way, way harder!”

You know... Maybe that sort of passion was something I could learn from as a streamer. But this schedule was just...

Looking at everyone else’s uncomfortable faces, I got the feeling that they felt the same way.

“Why’re you all looking at Hikari like that? Hikari’s tough, so this is a piece of cake! Hikari’s been fine this whole time, after all! So c’mon, let’s get back to practicing already!”

None of us knew what to say to her. All we could do was attempt to stop Hikari-chan from ending our obviously short break to resume practice. Of course, that schedule looked like a living hell to the rest of us...but in front of

Hikari-chan's radiant smile, declaring that it was what she lived for, we just couldn't find the words.

When the practice finally ended, Hikari-chan's singing did show some improvement, but it didn't reach a level of quality that we could wholeheartedly give the thumbs-up to, and it certainly didn't reach Hikari-chan's own standards.

Still, it was getting late. Mashiron would be staying the night at Chami-chan's house. I was a little down that she wouldn't be staying at mine, and it seemed like she noticed.

"This is an event for all of third gen," she explained, "so I want to get to know everyone better, not just you, Awa-chan. We'll be at Hikari-chan's house on the day of, so tonight will be Chami-chan."

I felt embarrassed...

We all left for our homes and split up along the way. But still, Hikari-chan's situation wouldn't stop nagging at the back of my mind.

Three days since then...

"Ah, this is the place."

I visited the apartment Hikari-chan lived in and rang the interphone. To understand why I was here, we have to wind back to the night of the third-gen practice session.

I'd left the studio and returned home without incident. I then finished up the day's tasks, after which I had nothing to do but go to sleep. But when I went to set an alarm on my smartphone, I noticed that I'd received a notification for a private message.

The sender was Hikari-chan, and the contents boiled down to: "Hikari thinks she can make some time three days from now, so if you're okay with it, Hikari'd like you to teach her how to sing."

I didn't have any reason to refuse, so I accepted her request, bringing us to today.

Still, this was my first time coming to Hikari-chan's home. I was surprised to find that she was only a few train stops away from me. And to be honest... After seeing that spartan schedule Hikari-chan was subjecting herself to, I was worried sick that she might have fallen under the weather, so I was less interested in doing serious singing practice and more hoping to use the opportunity to make her stop singing and rest her body. To that end, I'd looked up how to do massages and other stress-relieving exercises beforehand. She might catch on that we weren't going to practice singing, but I'd just have to come up with an excuse to get her to rest any way I could.

I had it all planned out, and then the door opened. That was when I came face-to-face with reality.

"Wheh, whehcuhmh, Ahwuhyuhkigh-chaghn..."

"?!"

I learned that even my worst fears for Hikari-chan were still too optimistic.

Hikari-chan...had ruined her throat.

I couldn't just stand by the entrance forever, so for now, I followed her up to her room, where we sat across from each other at the table. My head was still reeling, so first, I had to get a grip on what was going on.

"Hikari-chan, are you... Well, guess it's obvious you aren't *okay*, but what happened to your voice?"

"Wehll, yoh shii, gggh!"

I hurriedly stopped Hikari-chan when I saw her face instantly start contorting. It looked like the issue went deeper than a scratchy voice; speaking was giving her physical pain.

"Ah, you can write it out on your smartphone or something, no need to hurt yourself."



(HIKARI) "WHEH, WHEHCUHMH,
AHWUHYUHKIGH-CHAGHN..."

Hikari-chan looked apologetic as she covered her mouth with her hands, then reached for her smartphone and started typing. The whole time, she was lacking that vibrant energy I'd always felt from her. The ends of her lips were curled into a smile, true, but I could tell that they were pushed there by force.

When it looked like Hikari-chan had finished typing, she turned her smartphone screen toward me.

"Hikari still wasn't happy with her singing after we all practiced together, so Hikari's been practicing while working or during breaks. And yesterday, since you were coming over and all, Hikari decided to practice real hard after her stream...and when she woke up, her throat was dead."

"Dead? So...did you have any pain before today?"

"Hikari actually had a little pain after we all practiced together. But until today, Hikari thought she could take it, and her throat wasn't that scratchy on stream, so Hikari thought it'd be fine... Sorry for not saying anything."

"So, you mean to tell me that even though your throat was in pain, you still kept streaming and singing? Why would you do something that your body so obviously couldn't handle?!"

Looking back, that overly forced singing style of hers had to have put a lot of strain on her throat. We didn't notice because Hikari-chan was still energetic enough to demand even *more* practice, but yeah, her voice had probably gone through far more stress than the rest of ours had.

But come on, anyone would take that as a sign to give their throat some rest, right?! Why would she *continue* practicing?

My tone had come out a bit harsher than I'd intended, but Hikari nonetheless kept up her smile while she typed up her response, as though the answer was so obvious that it went without saying.

"Because Hikari couldn't accept it. Hikari's singing still wasn't good enough to make the viewers happy, so she had to try harder."

"Just because you couldn't accept it..."

Didn't mean that you had to take it this far, I initially thought with shock. But

she kept typing, and the new line on the smartphone screen sent me so far past shock that I couldn't find the words.

"But it's okay! Hikari's still gonna work hard! So let's get started already!"

Get started? Did that mean that Hikari-chan...was going to *keep* practicing...even after all the damage it had done to her?

"I... Don't be ridiculous! No practice for today! I'm taking you straight to a doctor!!!" I bolted up; I was honestly getting *angry* at the way Hikari was treating herself. "I've heard that throats can heal if the damage isn't too terrible. But no matter how your throat is doing, you'll be stopping all activities until it heals!"

With that, I grabbed my bags and prepared to leave. When I looked back to ask Hikari if she was ready to join me...I got a shock that struck me to my core.

Today, for the first time ever...the smile had vanished from Hikari-chan's face. In its stead was an expression of horror, as though the world were crumbling down around her.

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked. The expression was so unlike her that for a moment, I had to wonder if she was still Hikari-chan.

"Stop...activities? Youh meahn...Hikari 'on't stream?"

"Yes, that's exactly what it means...not that I can imagine you can do much streaming with your throat in that condition. For now, let's start with a serious break for your health. I think we'll need to hear from both a doctor and Live-On's staff to know how long it'll be, though."

Hikari-chan paused. "Two daiyz?"

"Absolutely not. Try at least a month—or more, depending on how fast your throat heals."

"N-Nhogh! Anyhih buht thahg!"

"Wait, Hikari-chan! You can't raise your voice like that!"

I thought I'd only stated the obvious, but Hikari was furiously shaking her head and shouting with no regard to the pain in her throat as she desperately refused.

“Agh whoh monsh ihg too lohng! Higahri hash soh many spohnsore’h strea’s! Theg’re ahreahty ahnou’ed! Ih’ll bee a bo’her to the cuhmpanies ig Higahri quids! O-Oh yeagh, whuh abouht the ahnniversa’y?!”

“Ah, the anniversary... Yep, we’ll have to postpone that too.”

“B-Buh you cah’t! Ahnnive’aries only ha’en ohne day a yeagh! Higahri can’d leddit ged postpohnd over her!”

“Hmm... All right, fine. For now, we’ll call Mashiron and Chami-chan and talk it out between the four of us.”

Honestly, I didn’t know why Hikari-chan was so desperate to refuse; I could understand not wanting to cause trouble for others, but I got the feeling that there wasn’t an option besides rest in this case...

Still, I had to get Hikari-chan to calm down first. I couldn’t let her strain her throat any more than she already had. Rather than keep trying to force the issue, it was probably best to play along for now and get a feel for what her perspective was. And to be fair, what Hikari-chan had said about the anniversary wasn’t exactly wrong. We needed to hear what Mashiron and Chami-chan had to say on the matter.

But when I called, well...

“Guess we’re postponing the anniversary. Awa-chan, go ahead and get Hikari-chan to a doctor.”

“Hikari-chan, don’t push yourself... Rest is important too...”

No surprises there.

“Got it. See, Hikari-chan? They both agree, so let’s take a break.”

“Oooooggghhhh...”

“The rest of us do want to celebrate our anniversary, sure. But if you push yourself now, you could possibly give yourself damage that’ll never heal. And that’ll be much, *much* more painful than putting off a celebration.”

“Buhd, buhd... The viewers’hre waiding...”

Hmm... I didn’t think she’d *still* refuse to rest after all that. She was so

stubborn that the three of us were starting to draw a blank as to how we could get through to her. But just then—

“I jusr don’d wanna disappoi’ the viewerhs...”

When I heard Hikari-chan quietly let those words slip, I finally understood why she was willing to sacrifice her own well-being to keep streaming.

So that’s it, I realized. Hikari-chan...is just mistaken on one very important thing.

I slowly, gently wrapped my arms around Hikari-chan.

“Huh?”

“Hikari-chan, I think I might finally understand how you’ve been thinking.”

I realized that Hikari-chan was making a mistake, but my voice carried a warmth that surprised even myself. After all, there had been a time when I’d made that mistake as well.

“You’re right, you can’t just take time off for no reason. Not living up to the hopes of your viewers...or worse, disappointing them...it’s terrifying, I know.”

“Agh...”

“You worry that they’ll forget about you if you take time off. You worry that you won’t be the person they thought you were. Just the thought of it gives you the shivers, I know.”

“Yeah...” Hikari-chan said, after a pause. She nodded, and at the same time, I felt the tension leave her body. Having the feelings that were probably swirling around in her heart put into words might have made her realize that I *did* understand her.

Just about all the work we do can only be done because of the support from our viewers. That’s why we try to think up fun stream ideas and offer entertainment to our viewers to be deserving of their support. It’s only because their viewers are there that a streamer is able to keep streaming, especially for people like us who make VTubing their livelihoods. That’s what makes our viewers such an immeasurably important presence in our lives.

For example, take our metrics. It makes us feel anxious when our subscriber

or live viewer counts go down, as though years are being taken off of our lives. That's why we feel we have to give our viewers more and more entertainment, and why disappointing them is out of the question.

Hikari-chan was a hard enough worker that she frequently overworked herself. That feeling was just especially strong for her, causing her to think of pleasing her viewers as her life's mission.

"On its own, I think it's a good thing that you want to work hard for your viewers. But right now, Hikari-chan...you've got it wrong."

Hikari-chan gasped; I could feel her body tense back up, likely from the shock of being betrayed by someone you thought understood you.

"Why? Whad's wrog wid worging hard for youhr viewerhs? A sreamer's godda value her viewerhs!"

"Yes, Hikari-chan, it's not wrong to feel that way from your point of view as a streamer. But Hikari-chan...have you ever thought about it from the point of view of your viewers?"

"Huh? Whuh... Whuddya meahn?"

"Ah, right... Let me word that differently. So, Hikari-chan, why do you think it is that your viewers support you?"

"Becauhse...they enjoy my streahms?"

"Yes, that is one reason. But there's a true reason that goes a bit deeper than that. The viewers who support us do so because they love *us*."

Yes, this was the thing I needed Hikari-chan to hear more than anything else.

"That love doesn't have to be romantic; in our cases, that love might be more like how you feel about your favorite talk-show talent. But you know, if they didn't love us, they wouldn't go out of their way to spend their precious time watching our streams, and they certainly wouldn't send supers or buy our merch, right? Most of all, people who'd go that far...would never want to see the person they love in pain!"

Hikari-chan was silent.

"Just like your viewers have fun when you have fun, your viewers will be in

pain when you're in pain! They might joke around, but they don't want to see their oshi suffer! They want the person they love to have a smile on her face! If those feelings are what we have to dedicate our work to...then why, Hikari-chan, are you doing something that would make your viewers sad?!"

Hikari-chan was still speechless.

"I'm sure you have viewers who like to see you enjoy your endurance streams, but no viewer of yours wants you to sing or speak while putting yourself in pain! You said at the studio that your viewers were your reason to live, didn't you? But for some of your viewers, supporting you is *their* reason to live! What good would it do to make *those* people sad?!"

I'd gotten a bit emotional at the end and kind of blurted the rest out, but I'd more or less said what I wanted to say.

While I caught my breath, Mashiron and Chami-chan chimed in from the phone.

"Awa-chan's right. Also, let me say one thing. You're underestimating your viewers if you think a short little break would make them stop supporting you. So I can understand if you're afraid of disappointing them, but trusting in your viewers and resting when you need to is an important part of our job."

"Hikari-chan. You know, I had a time when I thought I had less impact than other streamers. But it turned out that the best solution was to take it easy and just be myself. And even though some weird stuff happens when I sit back and relax, none of that ever disappointed my viewers, and some even took it as a plus. Working hard and overworking might look similar, but I think they're very different things."

Yeah, I guess everyone had problems like these in this line of work. I was no different... The days before I'd gone viral from forgetting to turn off my stream had been rough. But continuing your activities gave you a sense of stability, especially if you got popular, which let you cool your head and see the bigger picture.

Hikari-chan was different, though. She was a pretty popular streamer. While I had my reservations about giving numbers too much weight, they still made a pretty definitive score to shoot for. It was just that Hikari-chan never stopped,

and I doubted she ever would, even if she made it to the top of the streaming world. The more fans she got, the harder and harder and harder she'd work, like she was running a marathon where the only finish line was the limits of her own body.

I was really grateful that we'd been able to notice and stop her in time. Being a hard worker who put her viewers first was one of Hikari-chan's strengths, but over time, her hard work had started to veer in the wrong direction.

It was looking like we'd gotten through to Hikari-chan. The tension vanished from her body, and she was now leaning on me as sort of an apology for what she'd done.

"Hikari-chan. The way we *should* work hard for our viewers is to take care of our health so that we can be in our best condition when we're on stream. So how about we go to the doctor?"

"Okay... Sorry."

And so, we had a doctor at the hospital take a look at Hikari-chan's throat. Fortunately, the damage hadn't developed into a serious issue, so after consulting with Live-On's staff, we set up a month of medical leave for her and postponed our anniversary stream to line up with it.

Shortly after announcing the hiatus, Live-On gave an apology to us third-gen streamers. Hikari-chan's determination to cram everything into her schedule apparently put her at odds with her manager, leading to daily battles as her manager tried to give her *some* amount of downtime. Her manager had been barely holding the line of making Hikari-chan rest enough to keep her body from breaking down, but they'd miscalculated this time, and for that, they were sorry.

But after hearing more details from Hikari-chan, the mistake clearly wasn't just on Live-On management's end. It turned out that Hikari-chan, based on her past experience, had figured that her manager would absolutely shoot down the idea of adding singing practice to her current schedule, so with her back against the wall, she'd chosen to simply not mention it.

Sure, it was a sign of just how much Hikari-chan wanted to make our

anniversary stream a great one, but it still wasn't right. In the end, Hikari-chan told her manager that she was sorry, so all's well that ends well.

This situation had hopefully shown Hikari-chan just how much her manager worried about her health. With a deeper sense of trust between them, we probably wouldn't be seeing incidents like this again.

Ah, it's so lovely when we all get along, I thought. You gotta look for the silver linings in times like these.

Speaking of which, there was one more silver lining to Hikari-chan's break.

"Mmmmgh!" **nuzzle nuzzle**

"Ah ha ha! C'mon, Hikari-chan, your hair's tickling me!"

Hikari-chan and I had always been pretty close before, but now, Hikari-chan was opening up to me even more.

This whole thing deepened the friendships among the third gen, meaning Hikari-chan gained a deeper trust in us all...but, while I might have been overthinking it, I got the feeling that the affection she showed me was on another level from what she gave Mashiron and Chami-chan.

Hikari-chan was clearly pretty glum for the first week of her hiatus, probably because she felt guilty about everything that had happened. Healing her throat was obviously the main reason for the hiatus, but that schedule of hers was still way too densely packed to not have taken its toll, so we were taking the opportunity to give the rest of her body a break as well. Part of that meant keeping her social media exposure to a minimum, given the risk of her staying glued to her phone. Still, I worried that this hiatus wouldn't do much for Hikari-chan's physical or mental health with how blatantly miserable she was looking.

Her throat was still healing, so voice chat wasn't a great idea. There were plenty of streamers who'd sent well-wishes, but times like these called for some face-to-face communication. So, given that I lived close by, I went to Hikari-chan's house a few times a week to hang out when I had some time to spare. It seemed that Aiko-san, the friend of Hikari-chan's whom I'd met on our date a while back, visited her on days that I didn't go, and slowly but surely, I saw Hikari-chan start to regain the light she'd always embodied.

“I’m sorry about all this. I know you even warned me beforehand, but I was still too slow in stopping Hikari-chan...” Aiko-san and I had exchanged numbers before, so I apologized to her about the matter over the phone.

“Oh, no, you have nothing to apologize for. I’m sure that I was wrong and that you did the right thing. I might have been able to steer Hikari away from those choices in the short term, but I can’t say that it would have solved the underlying issue. I think Hikari needed the direct intervention that you and your friends gave her. I truly thank you for saving my dear friend.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing like that!”

I was supposed to be giving the apology here, but Aiko-san had turned around and thanked me instead. She must have been really worried... Hikari-chan sure had a good friend.

We ended the call more or less bowing at each other, and my days with the suddenly affectionate Hikari-chan continued. I was the one who’d first met Hikari-chan on that day she ruined her throat, so I figured that was why she was acting so friendly...but, well, this led me to realize that I had another problem.

This girl has way too much energy!

The engine that powered her was just *different*.

With her mental health recovered, she was now faced with boredom. We naturally played video games together, but one game ending immediately led to the next, and the next, and then she’d scurry off to some corner of the house and show up moments later with playing cards or board games.

These endless “Let’s play!” attacks had me feeling like a parent getting dragged around by their overly energetic kid. I recalled saying something about wanting to be Hikari-chan’s mom during that night where I’d forgotten to cut my stream, but I hadn’t thought it’d be coming true like this...

Just the other day, this girl had brought out a darn Battledome set. Sure, her mental health was back, but her throat was still recovering. She’d been allowed to talk at low volumes lately, but any loud shouts were off-limits, even when

playing. Doesn't the thought of Battledome with only two players, one of whom isn't allowed to raise her voice, strike you as a bit empty? I mean, I still did it, because I couldn't say no to those sparkling eyes after she'd lugged it all the way here...

Even if she couldn't raise her voice, Hikari-chan looked like she was having fun no matter what game we played, and she frequently expressed herself by clinging to me or nuzzling her head against me. Even if it took a lot out of me, part of me was still happy, so I more or less enjoyed it too...

But then I realized something.

This doesn't feel much like rest, does it?

It was wonderful that playing around helped her mental health so much, but weren't we playing around a bit too much? Sure, it was a change of pace, but my idea of "rest" involved a lot more lying down and, well, resting. Hikari-chan in particular was a short sleeper, if I recalled. That might have just been how her body worked, but I did wish she could take this rest period to get a full night's sleep.

That led me to start thinking about how I could get Hikari-chan to relax a bit more, and that reminded me: I'd planned to practice singing with Hikari-chan on that day she ruined her throat, but I had also considered giving her a massage that day as well. I still remembered what I'd studied, so I suggested to Hikari that I give her a light shoulder massage. She emphatically nodded her head up and down with a smile, which I took as a yes.

"All right, I'll get started... Ahh, you're pretty stiff."

"Gh!!!"

"Oh, did that hurt? It'll be bad for your throat if you make any noises from the pain, so should I do it a bit lighter?"

"No... No, this is fine."

"Huh, really? Well...all right, then. Just be careful not to raise your voice even if it *does* hurt, okay?"

With that, I began her shoulder massage. When I was done, Hikari-chan's face looked flushed, as though she had a fever, and her body had lost all of its tension.

Hm? I thought. I can understand losing tension, but why's her face red? Did it not feel good for her?

I worried for a moment, but it turned out that this was a rave review. Hikari-chan was later shocked by how deeply she slept that night, and she couldn't believe how much better she felt the next morning.

Guess that red face meant it felt good. Phew, that's a relief.

Ever since, Hikari-chan started asking me for massages. However, I had some concerns about her shoulders getting massaged every single day, so I asked her where else she would like it, and I got a surprising answer: the soles of her feet. That answer caught me off guard since I expected to hear something like her back, but it was for Hikari-chan, so I frantically looked up how to perform a foot massage.

"Is this all right? Doing your feet comes with a pretty high risk of pain. Given your throat's condition, I'll stop immediately if you raise your voice!"

"Sure! So, if you'd please..." pant, pant...

And so the foot massage began. Just in case, Hikari-chan was covering her mouth with both hands as she endured my work.

So... Kinda late here, but Hikari-chan's appearance was like the dictionary definition of an extrovert. The type of woman I thought I'd never have anything to do with in my life. Yet here I was, directly touching the feet of one—and as I continued my massage, Hikari's face grew redder, with her hands desperately planted over her mouth to keep from making a sound...

Er, I started to feel like I was doing something naughty here, but this was for my dear genmate, so I ignored those whispers of my heart and focused on providing a good, honest massage.

As for the session's results, in addition to the same flushed face and relaxed muscles as before, Hikari-chan also dropped her hands to reveal a faint line of drool dribbling from her mouth.

I didn't realize it felt that good, I thought. Maybe I've got a knack for massaging?

With a newfound confidence in my skill, I started to find the fun in massaging. And then, Hikari-chan revealed the massage she wanted next...

"Hikari would like you to do this..."

"Are... Are you sure?"

The smartphone screen she showed me displayed a strange massage in which the recipient was lying face down as the massager stepped on their back.

Uhh, if Hikari-chan wants me to do this, does that mean I'll be stepping on her? I thought. *Wait, I have to give this some more consideration.*

"Hmm... I thought this a little with the foot massage, but I don't know if a beginner like me should be attempting a massage on this level. You sure you don't want to have a professional do this for you?"

Those were my honest thoughts, but after a pause, Hikari-chan said...

"Hikari wants *you* to step on her, Awayuki-chan."

After hearing Hikari-chan whisper those words into my ear, my mouth accepted the request before my brain could process it.

"It would be an honor and a privilege."

Where did Hikari-chan learn to be so provocative?! I wondered. Wait, no, calm down. This is Hikari-chan, after all; I'm sure there's no deeper meaning here. This is just a massage, just physical therapy! Begone, dark thoughts, I have to focus only on relieving the tension in Hikari-chan's muscles!

After burning that command into my mind, I proceeded to study the technique of this massage, and a few days later, it was time to put that knowledge to the test!

"Okay, if we use this, your body should be able to support mine. I'll get started, then."

"Please dooo!" *pant, pant, pant, pant!*

I performed the massage while being particularly careful not to put too much

of my weight into my feet. Once the massage was over...

“.....”

Hikari-chan was totally out of it; her tongue was sloppily hanging out of her wide-open mouth and her eyes were rolling back in her head. She was actually making an ahegao. She was even twitching a little every now and then.

I can't believe it, I thought in amazement. Hikari-chan, of all people, is making that face?

“There's no doubt about it... I must be a prodigy at massages!”

Awakening this hidden talent within me gave me a strange sense of elation, but...

Before I knew it, the halfway point of Hikari-chan's hiatus had passed, and the day of her return came ever closer.

Chami-chan was the one at Hikari-chan's house today. She'd heard in the third-gen group chat that I'd been hanging out at Hikari-chan's house, so she volunteered to visit too.

Chami-chan must have been pretty worried about Hikari-chan if she of all people was willing to volunteer. Mashiron wanted to visit as well, but she sounded frustrated that the long trip meant that she couldn't get it to work.



Chami-chan should be there by now, I thought. Tee hee, knowing Chami-chan, she's probably at her wit's end trying to keep up with Hikari-chan's energy.

"Hm?"

As I was checking my schedule on my phone and noticing how I could take it easy today, I suddenly got a call from Chami-chan. Did something happen?

"Hey, hello ther—"

"A, A-A-A-A-A-Awayuki-chan!!!!!"

Chami-chan's panicked voice cut me off before I could get my greeting out.

"Wh-What happened, Chami-chan?!"

"Y-You, wh-wh-wha..."

"Hm???"

"Why have you been training Hikari-chan to be a masochiiiiiiiiiiist?!?!?!"

"Uh..... Huh?"

I took a moment to process Chami-chan's scream that blared from my phone's speaker.

Huh? Mm..... Hm?!

.....

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!?!?"

I had no clue what Chami-chan meant by "training her to be a masochist," and she certainly didn't get any more coherent from there, so I went over to Hikari-chan's house at once.

I was out of breath by the time I reached it, but Hikari-chan welcomed me with an impassioned hug. Now the three of us were sitting at a table and facing each other.

"All right, Chami-chan. Could I ask you to *please* explain what happened here?"

"Sure, sorry about getting so flustered before."

“Hmm hm hmm! ♪”

Chami-chan seemed to have calmed down a bit in the time it'd taken me to get there, so hopefully she was now able to give me an actual explanation. Still, I felt an unease between Chami-chan and me, and I struggled to pin down why. Hikari-chan was still in high spirits, but hearing her hum the tune to our anniversary song just made me more uneasy. The damage to her throat was almost entirely healed, so I was comfortable with that part. But...

“Umm, I guess I'll explain things in order,” Chami-chan said.

“Sure.”

“As you already know, Awayuki-chan, I promised to visit today, so I showed up at Hikari-chan's house.”

“I'm with you so far.”

“So, after Hikari-chan unlocked the front door and let me inside, she faced me and spread her legs in an M-shape and said, ‘Chami-chan! Let's do a Skylab Hurricane! Hikari will be the springboard!’”

“Hm. Could you perhaps explain things in order?”

“Sorry, but that was uncut.”

It seemed that somehow, this hiatus had given Hikari-chan a new kind of damage.

“What in the world does this all mean?” I asked.

“Yes, I figured you'd be confused, just like I was. I mean, I didn't even know what this ‘Skylab Hurricane’ thing *was*.”

“Yeah, I don't really picture you being much of a soccer fan.”

“Anyway, I'll continue. Hikari-chan looked at me and realized that I didn't know what she was talking about, so next, she got on all fours and said, ‘Chami-chan! When you take those shoes off, can you place them on top of Hikari's head?’”

“Oh, no, you can't call that a continuation—those two details are about as connected as that hallway you tried building in WorldCraft before giving up

halfway through.”

“This is also uncut. And is it just me, or was there zero hesitation with that diss there?”

This was uncut?! I couldn’t understand what any of this meant... The Captain Tsubasa move I could still see as something Hikari-chan would do, but the shoe thing was just a mystery to me...

“So next, I knew that something was definitely strange, so I panicked and asked Hikari-chan why she’d ever want someone to do that to her.”

“The correct response.”

“After that, she cleared up that it was ‘Awayuki-chan’s fault,’ so I called you.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why me?! I’m being framed! I want a lawyer!”

“Well, it’s probably best to let Hikari-chan explain it from here.”

Chami-chan called to Hikari-chan, who started talking as though she’d been waiting for this moment.

“Awayuki-chan! You know how you gave Hikari those massages?”

“Yes, I did that.”

“Well, y’see, back then, when you massaged Hikari’s shoulders, it actually hurt a little. Till now, whenever people hurt Hikari, it made Hikari feel kinda funny, so Hikari always avoided that.”

“Oh, so it *did* hurt back then. Sorry about that... But what do you mean by ‘feeling funny’?”

“Right, well, it’s this sorta tingly sensation that Hikari’s not good with. But Awayuki-chan, when you gave Hikari that massage, it still hurt and still felt tingly, but somehow Hikari thought it wasn’t too bad, so Hikari wanted you to keep going! Eh heh heh, guess Hikari had some deep trust in you after you stopped her from hurting her throat even more!”

.....

“And then, and then! As you kept going, the tingles started turning to shivers, and at the end, it was like something went boom deep in Hikari’s body! And it

felt suuuuper good! Strange, isn't it?"

.....

"Hikari just couldn't forget it, and it felt even better when you did Hikari's feet, and since being stepped on is like a combination of something physical with something emotionally degrading, it felt so amazing that Hikari passed out! It makes Hikari regret avoiding something that feels so good!"

So. As I listened to Hikari-chan, I recalled everything I knew about her from her words and actions.

Hikari-chan had a heavily packed schedule and worked so hard that she'd destroyed her throat...but aside from that, not once had I seen her exhausted by any of her long streams. In fact, even in the endurance streams where she put nightmare-mode restrictions on herself, the kind so torturous that any normal human would want to run away and cry, Hikari-chan always seemed to be having *fun*.

Yep, it was all coming together now. This was the true nature of the Hikari-chan we'd always known. She was a budding fetishist who connected pain to pleasure. She just had a subconscious aversion to it, thinking that going any further would be bad somehow, so her fetish had never grown beyond a bud.

At least, until now. I'd opened Pandora's box. The massive amount of trust Hikari-chan had in me suppressed her inhibition, as though she was choosing me. My misplaced confidence in my massaging skills caused me to water that bud, and soon enough, it bloomed. Yep, it was cracked wide open.

Long story short...

"That's why, you see! Hikari knew Chami-chan was coming today, and Chami-chan loves Hikari lots, so Hikari asked her if she could do something for her!"

Hikari-chan had gone through a sexual (masochistic) awakening!

"Well, you heard her," Chami-chan said. "So, Awayuki-chan, how are you going to take responsibility for what you've done?"

"Huh? You're saying this is *my* fault?! Even after all the hard work I put into learning how to give massages?"

“Yeah, that’s right! Awayuki-chan did nothing wrong!”

Chami-chan glared at me with disapproval, but Hikari-chan was willing to cover for me to the point of jumping in between us.

“Hikari-chan... You’re right! This was bound to happen eventually, yeah!” I said.

“Yeah, don’t worry, Awayuki-chan; Hikari will protect you! Chami-chan’s icy glare is meant for Hikari!”

“It...is?” I asked.

“Now, Chami-chan! Look at Hikari more with that disgusted expression, as though you found a dead cicada lying on the road on your way to school!”

“I’m sorry, Hikari-chan... I’m so, so sorry...”

“H-Huh? Awayuki-chan, why are you crying?”

Laying eyes on Hikari-chan taking such delight in masochism made me realize I couldn’t avoid the truth. This wasn’t “bound to happen.” I was responsible for this... Well, not that my guilt would’ve let me run away even if I tried.

“Calm down, Awayuki-chan. I’m not exactly angry here, you know?”

“Y-You’re not, Chami-chan?”

“Hikari-chan herself seems to enjoy it, and that’s all that matters, right? And besides, I’m not really one to talk... I’ve been going out of control myself and all.”

“Ch-Chami-chan! Thank you!”

Amazing! I thought as I ostensibly thanked Chami-chan. *This woman just looked at a pervert who trained her genmate into a BDSM fanatic and wasn’t in a position to criticize! It sure is a wide world out there!*

I didn’t say it out loud, however, as I realized that if the positions had been reversed, I wouldn’t have been one to talk either...

“Oh, yeah! Hikari’s having a ton of fun now and her body feels way better! Hikari always felt anxious unless she was doing something all day, but she felt super-duper satisfied that day Awayuki-chan gave her a massage, and then she

slept like a log the whole night!”

“Bwah ha ha ha ha! What now, Chami-chan? This is the power of Master Awayuki, the miraculous masseuse!”

“That sure went to your head quick... And if you’re a master at anything, it’s not as a masseuse, it’s as a dominatrix.”

“I-I ain’t no dominatrix! It’s not like I even *enjoyed* stepping on Hikari-chan, okay?!”

“Huh, you didn’t? I could’ve sworn you were scheming to make her lick your feet next.”

“Of course I’m not ‘scheming’ anything! If I did that, Hikari-chan would basically have her first kiss taken by my feet!”

“Phwahhm?!” **twitch, twitch**

“Cut that out, Awayuki-chan! You’re giving Hikari-chan pleasure by saying stuff like that!”

“Huuuuuuuh?! How was there anything like that in what I said? I just stated the truth!”

“So that was subconscious... I meant it as a joke before, but Awayuki-chan, you might actually be a master dominatrix.”

“No, no, I’m not into that sort of stuff...”

Really, the massage turning out that way had been pure coincidence, so I couldn’t have Hikari-chan hoping that I’d go all sadistic for her...

“Still, I’m starting to get afraid of what’ll happen once Hikari-chan goes back to streaming... Awayuki-chan, make sure you toss an insult her way to satisfy her every now and then, okay?”

“What’re you dumping the job on me for? You’re in this with me too, Chami-chan! That’s what genmate bonds are for, right?”

“Insults! Insults sound great! Do those, pretty please! Right now!”

Hikari-chan latched onto that “insult” word, so Chami-chan and I looked at each other as we figured out how to handle this. The thought of insulting a

genmate pained my heart...but it was hard to say no when Hikari-chan had the sparkling eyes of a child waiting for Santa...

“Y-You first, Chami-chan!”

“Huuuh?! Why me?!”

“Why not? You were the one who said ‘insult’ and got Hikari-chan on this kick!”

“But I couldn’t, I’ve never insulted anyone... Umm, ummm...”

“Hit Hikari with it, Chami-chan!”

“Hi-Hikari-chan, you...duuuumb-dumb!”

“Are you twelve?” I couldn’t resist jabbing at Chami-chan’s sorry excuse for an insult. I swear, she was gonna make Hikari-chan disappointed...

“Hahh... Ahhhhmm...”

“Huh? It seems like it actually worked,” Chami-chan remarked.

“For real?” I asked. “She keeps her fetish energy-efficient.”

That was really all Hikari-chan needed, huh? Well, maybe those low-level insults got her off because of how pure she was inside and how new she was to being a masochist.

“Th-There! You next, Awayuki-chan!” Chami-chan said.

“An insult from Awayuki-chan... Hahhh, hahhh...”

“Uhh, umm, let’s see...”

I spun my gears as fast as they’d go, but...

Crap, I thought, I can’t think of anything!

I mean, Hikari-chan was like the essence of all that was good in the world, so the thought of insulting her went against my very moral fiber! This might’ve been a bias on my part, but weren’t your typical masochists supposed to have, you know, *flaws* that were worth insulting? Why did such a sweetheart have to turn out to be a masochist?!

What do I do?! Ah... Oh, screw it, let’s just go with this!

“Hikari-chan, you...p-pervert!”

“Oh, you say something, pervert?” Chami-chan interjected.

“What about *you*, pervert?” I retorted.

“Haaaauuggghhhh!!!” *twitch, twitch*

In the end, we followed the whims of Hikari’s new interest and spent the whole day insulting her; it was a strange experience that wore down the spirits of the insulters while the insultee felt nothing but joy.

Incidentally, when we reported the news to Mashiron later that night...

“Awa-chan, why are you *always* leading Live-On’s streamers down the wrong path? Are you Kyubey? There’re no magical girls or witches here, you know?”

She was exasperated. Even though it was all a coincidence!

Oh... Hikari-chan made a new post, I noticed. We told her not to use social media unless it was important, so I wonder what it is.

[Hikari Matsuriya@Live-On Third Gen]

Awayuki-chan and Chami-chan insulted Hikari all day long today! It was super-duper fun!

“Noooooooooooo don’t tell ‘em thaaaaaaaat!!!!”

The next sound I heard was my ringtone, with Aiko-san on the other line.

“Awayuki-san, do you have this thing we call a ‘soul’?”

“It’s nooooooot like that! It’s technically *true*, but not like thaaaaat!!!”

Aiko-san and I got along well, and it sounded like she’d picked up from the way that message was written that it was Hikari-chan who’d started it, so we corrected the misunderstanding pretty quickly.

“I see. So, the truth is that you’ve been covertly training Hikari to be a masochist, and that you really did sling insults at her.”

Or so I thought. It turned out that the truth was far worse than the

assumption, so her voice felt even colder now. Why me?

“Geh... I swear it wasn’t on purpose... I’m sorry...”

“Heh heh, well, what matters is that Hikari seems to be having fun, so I forgive you. Just make sure you set up a safeword.”

“Why do you sound like you’re enjoying this?!”

I figured that the viewers probably picked up on the same things Aiko-san did, but just in case, Chami-chan and I set up a guerrilla stream to explain everything to them and clear things up. On the other hand, they all made fun of us for being “monsters who insulted their genmate with the ruined throat all day long.”

Why were *we* the ones getting insulted at the end?!

Idle Talk: Mashiro Irodori Answers Castellas

“Kon-mashiro, it’s Mashiro Irodori of Live-On’s third generation. I’m gonna answer some Castellas today.”

That voice that could be called melancholy, gentle, boyish, and in some ways even ethereal belonged to the Live-On third generation’s Mashiro Irodori.

Mashiro was an illustrator and also something of a partner to Awayuki. Live-On’s roster was made of some *very* colorful characters, so she was often the one who had to keep them in check during collabs. Improvising in conversation with these people was no easy task, but Mashiro pulled it off as though it were second nature. People who could emphasize the strengths of others without overshadowing them themselves were a treasure in any discipline.

But today, Mashiro had prepared a solo stream. These Castella responses allowed her to set the pace, letting her otherwise subtle talk skills take center stage.

Q: What outfits do you like? I’d like to know about your favorite outfits from what you’ve drawn.

“If you remember that sleepover stream with Awa-chan where we thought up new outfits for her, I liked the short shorts with the pockets pulled out that showed up there. Awa-chan shot it down, but I have a V-line fetish. Also, the pictures of Awa-chan wearing my unrevealed outfi—whoops, slip of the tongue.”

Q: What outfits do you think would fit Live-On members other than Awa-chan?

“Hmm... I figure Hikari-chan would look good with her hair down in a standard

sailor uniform, right? Her usual clothes are pretty showy, so I think the gap between the two styles would be nice. I'll draw it sometime."

Q: (After looking at your chest) Any comment?

"Stupid, jerk, go away, jeez! Why do these chest jokes always pop up? I might *look* small because my genmates all just happen to be a bit big and also it's not like I've got absolutely nothing, okay?! In fact, I take issue with how we call it 'nothing'—it implies it's abnormal, like there's a lack of 'something' that should be there. There have to be better ways to describe small chests, like 'petite' or 'humble.' My chest isn't defined by what it lacks; large breasts and small breasts are both equally breasts, so even if what I have has a different charm, they're still just as valuable. Anyone who disagrees has a small *mind*, if you ask me, I swear."

: Mashiron's into V lines, got.

: Mashiron might be chill, but I love how honest she gets about what she loves.

: I'd like to see everyone in a sailor uniform, not just Hikari-chan! I wonder if they'll do anything official...

: She starts talking fast the second boobs come up lol

: I love you when you're worrying about your chest size, Mashiron!

: All right, how about we call flat chests "Mash chests" from now on? So they're still that small even after mashing extra stuffing into your bra, huh...

: someone's got a death wish lol

Q: Mashiron, you don't have to hide it. (*grin*) You know you love Awa-chan, right? (*grin*)

Q: Which would you rather have, a StroZero-flavored

Awayuki or an Awayuki-flavored StroZero?

Q: Who do you like more, Shuwa-chan or Awa-chan? Feel free to talk about everything you like about either one.

“I’m lumping these together since they’re pretty similar, but for starters, I like both Awa-chan and Shuwa-chan. It shouldn’t be something that bears repeating. I just seem cold to her on the surface because that’s how we joke around. I figure there are plenty of my viewers who like Awa-chan too, but I guarantee you I like her more than you do. But between Awa-chan and Shuwa-chan... Hmm, maybe it’s just me here, but even though we give different names to Awa-chan and Shuwa-chan, I still look at them as part of the same person, so it’s hard to say there’s a preference. Still, if I had to give an answer, I’d say I love the streamer named Awayuki Kokorone. Having these two sides that fit together so perfectly is just part of her appeal.”

Q: ???: “Hahh... Hahh... You’re a bad girl, Awa-chan.”

Awayuki: “Huh? When did I fall asleep...?”

???: “You’ve been getting all flirty with Alice-chan and Hikari-chan while I just get led on.”

Awayuki: (Th-That voice...)

Awayuki: (Ooh, ouch! There’s rope digging into my hands and feet!)

???: “You have no idea how much I’ve had to hold myself back!”

Awayuki: (N-Now I remember! I got here because...)

???: “You’re the one who sent that prediction Castella the other day, aren’t you?”

Awayuki: “No, I didn’t! I would never...”

Awayuki: (Oh, no! It’s happening just like it did in that Castella...)

???: “Shut up! If you’re going to lie, Awa-chan, then you need some discipline!”

???: “Awa-chan, I am your mama... Let’s show everyone what it means to be family.” *start stream*

Awayuki: “Wha?! N-No! You can’t...”

HAPPY END

“What is this insane wall of text... Also, she’s already got a legend for forgetting to turn her stream off; she doesn’t need a legend for keeping it on for too long on top of that. Also, this ‘???’ person definitely isn’t me, so no worries there.”

: Teetee!

: Just get married already.

: Amazing, you guys! The AwaMashi is rea-- (death from teetee)

: Insane walls of text brings out the savage Mashiron

: "keeping the stream on for too long" lol

Q: Looks like two of your genmates have pierced the heavens now, can we have your thoughts?

“Good luck, Ehrai-chan and Awa-chan, ’cause that ain’t my problem.”

Q: At some point, you wound up being Live-On’s token sane person. Any thoughts?

“Hmm... Am I even the token sane person? Because when someone asked me how to draw belly buttons on stream the other day, I told them to draw a line they’d want to lick, you know? I think your standards are just broken.”

Q: I just happened to wonder, do you enjoy drinking like Shuwa-chan does? I'd love to see a ShuwaMashi drinking collab stream someday.

"I'll have this be the last Castella. I guess I don't drink much on my own. But if you want a drinking stream, we did just announce that the sleepover stream for third gen's one-year anniversary was getting pushed back to celebrate our one-year-and-one-month anniversary instead, right? I think you might get your wish then."

: In terms of communication skills, there's nobody who can worst Chami-chan.

: not "best her" but "worst her" lmao

: lmao at how Mashiron's saying she wants to stick her tongue in the bellies of her drawings

: Pervert Mashiron honestly gets me hype

: You're gonna be drinking?! LET'S GOOOOOO!!!

: The Hikari-chan comeback!!!!

Even when the focus was on her, Mashiron still made sure to set the stage for her genmate's return.

Chapter 5: Third Generation Debut One-Year-and-One-Month Anniversary Stream

From the planning stages of the anniversary stream, to Hikari's injury-induced hiatus, to the postponement of the anniversary, to Hikari-chan's "awakening"... Things had really been so hectic that I barely had a moment to catch my breath. Even off stream, Live-On was gonna Live-On.

It had been an emotional rollercoaster, but that was all behind us—today was the moment we'd all been waiting for, and we weren't going to let a single drop of water rain on our parade. We all needed some time for a big celebration.

We all met face-to-face on the big day. The four of us looked each other in the eyes and took a deep breath together; come one, come all, ladies and gentlemen, the wait was finally over!

"Live-On Third Generation! Happy one-year-and-one-month anniversary!!!!!" we shouted in unison.

It was *fiiiiinally* time for this stream to begin!!!!

: It's here! It's finally here!

: Thank goodness, I'm so happy the whole collab didn't just get canned...

: Congrats!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

: YEEEEEEEEAH!!!! ¥50,000

: Did I just hear Hikari-chan in there?!

"All right! Now, then! The day has finally come! I'm Awayuki Kokorone from the third generation!"

"Really, this whole thing has me wondering if any of our meetups actually *do*

go as planned. Mashiro Irodori from third gen here.”

“Now, now, I think this stuff is fine every now and then. It’s more romantic and emotional than if we just got together without any trouble. I’m Chami Yanagase from third gen.”

“Well... You might be right,” Mashiron conceded. “I kinda like this sense of delayed gratification. It would’ve been nice if we could’ve streamed on the original day without a hitch, but we’d definitely be missing out on this feeling.”

“Exactly!” I agreed. “Besides, we just so happen to have something else to celebrate today too! Viewers, it’s just like we told you before, but today! Today, our dear genmate is back from her hiatus! I know you all can’t wait any longer, so get ready, because here she comes!”

...

U-Um? So, the plan was to use that group shout to hint at Hikari being here and then have her burst forth with glee right this moment, right?!

Panicked, I joined everyone in turning toward Hikari-chan. We saw her standing stock-still and looking down at the ground.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Hikari-chan?!” I asked in a hushed voice.

Hikari-chan turned our way in jerky, almost robotic movements. “H-Hikari’s scared...”

“Huh? Scared? Of what?”

“Well, is it gonna be okay? Is everyone gonna ask who this girl is because they forgot about Hikari?! Are they gonna be mad because Hikari pushed the anniversary back a month?!”

Once Hikari-chan got started, the worries just kept pouring out one after another in a weak, desperate voice.

“H-Hold up! You sounded fine just a minute ago!”

“The nerves only came when the stream went live! Hikari had to push herself to do that first shout!”

“Don’t give us that, the stream is just getting started. Really, did you forget

what I told you? Your viewers won't abandon you over something like this. They're better than that."

"And Hikari believes you! But she just can't stop being scared now that the moment's here."

"Hikari-chan, aren't you a masochist? If anyone *does* flame you, wouldn't you enjoy that?"

"That's a different thing! Hikari wants pain that has *love* in it!"

"Ummm... Sorry to interrupt when you're trying to be quiet, but just so you know, the mic's picking up everything you're saying."

At Chami-chan's voice, the other three of us blankly blurted out, "Huh?"

Hikari-chan's face was the only one to go pale. But that vanished as well when she blankly blurted out another "Huh?"

Surprised to hear that the mic had picked up everything, Hikari-chan lifted her sunken head and caught sight of the streaming PC's screen.

And once Hikari-chan did...she didn't look back down.

No, if anything, she was forgetting to even blink—

She simply locked her gaze to one corner of the screen—

Yes, one corner that wouldn't stop scrolling by—

She was looking at the chat box, which was lit up with the excitement of a festival—

: Hikari-chan, congrats on your return!

: Hikari-chan, come on out!!!

: We've been waiting! I'm so happy to see our lively Hikari-chan again!!!

: Congrats (?) on your return and your masochist thing!

: I'm glad your throat healed.

: **Congrats on your return and masochization! Is that**

second one something I should congratulate someone for...?
To solve this mystery, we must venture further into the
unexplored lands of Live-On..... ¥50,000

: Hikari-chan's back! Grats!

: I got you a gift for coming back (a low-temperature
candle), now have fun with Shuwa-chan with it

: Welcome back! Did you have a nice rest?

: Live-On's ray of hope has returned! Hm? Huhwha?!

: Hikari-chan, congrats on the awakening and return!
¥10,000

: lmao at how the comments are buried in BDSM stuff just
in case

: Hm? Wait, what's this "awakening" and "masochist"
stuff? Did something happen to Hikari-chan?

: awayuki-chan gave her bdsm training during her hiatus
or something

: Huh?

: Why, you sound as though you don't understand!

: Well don't worry, the rest of us heard Awa-chan explain
what happened and we STILL have no idea!

: The Hiatus of BDSM Training, the sequel to The Stream
that Ended with a Barf

: They're way too committed to entertainment ¥610

: Did Awayuki-chan make someone's fetish bloom by
watering it with StroZero *again*?

: I think you could count Shion-mama, Ehrai-chan, Chami-
chan, Kaeru-chan, and Alice-chan too.

: Her skill isn't Pioneer of the Stars, it's Pioneer of
the Fetishes. ¥211

: To think that Hikari-chan trusted her genmate enough to finally take a break, only for Awa-chan to turn around and train her in BDSM to the point that they had to hold a stream announcing that she was a perfectly happy masochist...

: kusa

: I just had an idea. What if Awa-chan's trying to take back her role as the seiso one by making everyone else so yabai that she seems wholesome by comparison???

: The perfect crime. The True Awayuki Kokorone Seiso Reclamation Project has been set into motion...

: No matter how much she raises her relative seiso levels, her objective seiso levels are stuck as is, so her new plan is to remove the concept of seiso from all of Live-On.

: Congrats on your return. Feel free to stream every waking second in your second year too, as long as you mind your health.

: Well, Hikari-chan always had a bit of a masochist streak in her...

: true

: The M in Matsuriya stands for Masochism! Huzzah...

: Um... I should be glad that you're healthy again, but I think a different part of your health took a nosedive...

: Hikari-chan... I always knew you had it in you...

: i think everyone here's unlocked their final forms by now...

: Either way, she's back, and I'm celebrating!

: We've been waiting for you to come back!

: Hearing your voice after all this time has me on the brink of tears. I'm so, so happy that it wasn't too late for your throat. ¥5,000

: My eternal thanks to Awayuki-chan for stopping Hikari-chan from hurting herself! Congrats on the anniversary, here's a contribution to the new StroZero fund! ¥10,000

: welcome back.

“Y-You...guys...”

Her vacant eyes were slowly regaining their sparkle.

Chami-chan, Mashiron, and I looked at each other and firmly nodded. We wrapped our hands behind Hikari-chan and pushed her toward the mic.

Hikari-chan wiped her watering eyes and gave an embarrassed laugh. Her face no longer showed the slightest hint of fear.

“Uhh, hey, everyone! The light of the festival is here for all to enjoy! Eh heh, the light of your festival made it here! llllllllll it’s Live-On Third Generation’s Hikari Matsuriya!”

Yeah, this was it; this was how streamers and viewers supported each other. This was how we were meant to be.

And with this, Hikari-chan! Had made! A complete recovery!!!

“Ah, the warm fuzzies... Her bonds with her viewers are giving me the warm fuzzies...” I sighed.

“Yeah... If it weren’t for the BDSM thing, I might actually agree with you there,” Mashiron said.

“You could say that again...” Chami-chan said.

“Ah, the chills... The glares of my genmates are giving me the chills...”

Scratch that! With this, Hikari-chan! Had fallen! Into complete degeneracy!!!! (;_;) One awkward pause later, I changed the subject. “All right, then, we’ve got the starting intros out of the way, so let’s explain the contents of today’s

stream. We announced it beforehand on Cheeper, but the four of us are all having a sleepover at Hikari-chan's house!"

"We wanted to time it to land on the one-year anniversary... But Hikari made it get pushed back, so she's sorry... Ooogh, why did Hikari do something so dumb in the first place..."

"Now now, it's good to acknowledge your mistakes, but you can't beat yourself up over them," Chami-chan soothed her.

"That's right. Besides, like Chami-chan said in her intro, having a one-year-and-one-month anniversary fits us better, doesn't it? Exceeding expectations is what makes Live-On Live-On."

"M-Mashiro-chan!"

"Oh, uhh, I don't think I said anything worth being hugged over... But, um, there, there..."

Hikari-chan was so moved by Mashiron's words that she went and hugged her. Mashiron's face reddened at Hikari-chan's usual sense of personal space, but despite her bewilderment, she still hugged back. Teetee!



¥1000
Awa-c
Hikari
Grat
cont

or stop
rself t
ere's a
StroZen

Hikari... n, con
on mak... t back

I've been waiting for you
come back, Hikari-chan

I come home

●LIVE

“Yeah, Mashiron, couldn’t have said it better myself! It really is up to us to do what nobody else would!”

“That’s right! Nothing wrong saying you love what you love! Long live voice fetishes!”

“Sorry to interrupt while you two pat yourselves on the back, but lately, I don’t think you’ve been ‘exceeding’ expectations so much as you’ve been ‘eschewing’ them. Could you spare a thought for me, the person who has to keep you knuckleheads in line?”

“Heeey, Mashiro-chan!”

“Hm? What is it, Hikari-chan?”

“Can you keep going and put Hikari in a bear hug? The wrestling kind where you grab real tight and lift someone up!”

“Ah, right, you’re no less of a weirdo than the other two, of course. Hmph!”

“Ooh, just like that! Just grip as hard as you can, don’t hold back!”

“Sh...Shut up, will ya?” *SLAP!*

“Eep?!”

Looking like she was already done, Mashiron took some distance from Hikari-chan before slapping her on the butt.

I, however, knew the truth: Mashiron *hadn’t* been holding back. She was trying to bear hug as hard as she could, but she was so weak that Hikari-chan didn’t even notice, leading her to pass off the attempt with a spank.

It was cute to see her get so intense over giving a hug.

I explained what had happened to the viewers. Mashiron attempted to stop me for a moment, but it was our duty as streamers to fill the viewers in, so she just fidgeted while glaring at me. Cute.

“Hey, Mashiron.”

“Hmph... What?”

“Wimp! ♥ Wiiiimp! ♥”

SLAP!

She spanked me without a word, which, to be fair, I had coming. Cute.

SLAP!

“Hyaugh?! Wha?! Why am I getting my butt slapped too?!”

“No reason, Chami-chan. I just figured your butt would feel nice to slap since it’s so huge.”

“I-It is *not* huge! Or...so I’d like to think. I kind of have a complex over it...”

“Really? You’re pretty tall, so I think your butt’s size gives you a nice hourglass figure. And Hikari-chan, quit convulsing and get up already!”

: I love these interactions, you could never get these if they weren't offline.

: SAAAAAME

: now THAT'S a masochist squeal lmao. Awayuki-chan trained her well.

: ALERT: Chami-chan! Has! A big butt!

: weren't tall dames with big butts a certain someone's type?

: I like girls who look good with a blade and a bundle of cash.

: Sorry, Chami-chan, but your dear Boss is taking the day off.

: can't move, mashiron's too cute

And so, our sleepover got off to a comfy start. We had things planned out pretty precisely, but we obviously had tons of time, so we took the whole stream at this sort of leisurely pace. We started off by recounting the events that had happened since Hikari’s throat injury, eventually leading us to talk about today and the sense of accomplishment we had in finally reaching it.

“More than a year has passed since our debuts,” I remarked. “I’m not certain if it’s been a long time or a short one.”

“Good point. But yeah, every day was so intense that it managed to feel both long *and* short,” Chami-chan said.

“That might’ve been *extra* true for Awa-chan,” Mashiron commented. “She’s got a knack for finding trouble, whether she makes it herself or gets dragged into whatever other people make.”

“Ooh! So Awayuki-chan’s just like Kindaichi or Conan! That’s so cool!” Hikari-chan exclaimed.

“Ah ha ha. When I did my first stream, I never would have imagined that I’d become the person I am today,” I said.

We started reflecting on our debuts. Ah, it took me back; I’d had no confidence and was terrified of letting my inner self show on the surface, so I forced myself to play this seiso character, putting me in a state of constant anxiety that not even streaming could relieve me of. I didn’t even acknowledge dirty jokes in the stream chat back then, and now, I was the one making them. Life’s funny like that. And it all started because I forgot to turn my stream off.

“First streams, huh?” Mashiron mused. “I don’t think I or Hikari-chan have changed much since then... Well, except the masochism thing.”

“Hikari’s always running at top speed!”

“Meanwhile, I was running *away*... I was so nervous on my first stream that I could barely speak, so then I tried to imitate Hikari-chan’s energy, only for all the comments to tell me that I didn’t have to push myself, and I’m *still* traumatized by it. But now...” Chami-chan paused. “Wait. Is it just me, or am I still running away all the time?”

“Now now, that’s one reason why you’ve grown in popularity as the klutzy type, isn’t it? And besides, with all that said, I’m having such fun right now.”

When I said that, everyone nodded and raised their voices in agreement. We continued to look at each other in silence, and then, for some reason, we all burst out laughing. None of us knew why...but I supposed the fact that we could all get together and laugh like this was what this anniversary was *really* all

about. It had been a frantic, chaotic, and idiotic road...but we were Live-On's third generation. We were frantic, chaotic, idiotic, and totally awesome!!!

With the intro all taken care of, it was finally starting to feel like a real sleepover. It was time to take advantage of being together in person to play the "I love you" game.

To give a brief rundown of the rules, two people had to pair up and take turns saying "I love you" to each other, and whoever got embarrassed first was the loser. We were planning to have round-robin matches between everyone, and the batsu game for whoever came last was, drumroll please, having to say "I love you" to the viewers using Chami-chan's ASMR mic.

We started off by boasting that confessing our love to each other would be a piece of cake after spending over a year together. The game progressed with blushes, laughs, and a sort of tingly atmosphere. Right now, it was Hikari-chan versus Chami-chan.

"Chami-chan! I love you!"

"Right... I love you too, Hikari-chan."

"Yeah... Hmm? Hikari gets the feeling that nobody's been getting embarrassed by her."

"You're too direct when you say it, so you're not gonna embarrass anyone. And you don't get embarrassed when you're on the other end, so you never lose either."

"Huuuh? That sounds kinda lame!"

"Not at all. You're maintaining a score of plus-minus zero, just like Saki from the mahjong manga."

"Ooooh?! What's that, it sounds sick! Monster powers, activate! Rinshan kaihou!"

"Ah, but going plus-minus zero sounds like Awayuki-chan too."

"Ooooh! That sounds cool too! Hikari is Stro±Zero! Getting hard, getting hard!"

“Gaaaaaaaah?! Hey now, Hikari-chan! Don’t go saying words you don’t understaaaaand!”

“Awa-chan...”

“Ah, Mashiron’s glare has finally gone beyond chilling... Those are the eyes of someone looking at garbage.”

And so, the match between Chami-chan and Hikari-chan ended. Mashiron and I were up next. While I’d previously had an accident where I got a nosebleed from Chami-chan telling me “I love you,” I didn’t get embarrassed much when saying it myself, so it was looking like I’d dodge last place. Mashiron, on the other hand, seemed to be pretty bad at saying it; she’d had a few self-destructs so far where she got super embarrassed. Chami-chan got wrecked whenever someone whispered, so the fight for the batsu was between those two.

“I can’t let myself lose anymore,” Mashiron said to pump herself up. “All right, I’ll start this time!”

“Okay!” I said.

Mashiron got close, gazed into my eyes, and said...

“Awa-chan... I lo—pffft bwah ha ha ha ha!!!”

“Whaaa?!”

Unfortunately, Mashiron turned away from me at the “love” part for some reason, and then she burst out laughing.

Wait, what’s the deal?! I thought. Mashiron had some self-destructs before, but she didn’t start laughing like this!

“S-Sorry, sorry, it’s just that the thought of saying ‘I love you’ to Awa-chan was so funny that I cracked up.”

“That sounds kinda rude, you know!”

It was such a shock to hear Mashiron say that with her back turned to me.

“Huh? Mashiro-chan, your face is all red! What’s up?”

“Wha, Hikari-chan?! You don’t have to say that stuff out loud!”

Mashiron had turned in a direction that just so happened to face Hikari-chan,

and her remark gave my sinking mood the updraft it needed to soar higher than ever.

Mashiron's face was beet red... I'd seen her cheeks get a bit flushed, but never *that* red... And with the way Mashiron was trying to play that off... Could it be?

Did Mashiron get embarrassed by me more than she did the others?

"Mashiron!!!"

"Hyaugh?!"

I grabbed Mashiron's shoulders, swung her around myself, and held her face in place with both hands. Sure enough, it was as red as a tomato. I brought my own face in close, enough for the tips of our noses to nearly touch, and...

"I love you."

"Mmmmrgh... I can't do this anymooooooooore!!!!!"

After I confessed my undying affection to Mashiron, she forced herself out of my grasp, made a mad dash for the door, and holed up in the bathroom. Seeing the effect I had on her put a big smile and an even bigger nosebleed on my face.

But there was still more! This wasn't over yet! Mashiron had lost to me when saying it *and* hearing it, which put her down two points and guaranteed that she'd be the target for the batsu.

"Uuurgh... I've never given my viewers sweet talk like this..."

Mashiron came out of the bathroom a few minutes later with a pouty look on her face. Sitting in front of the ASMR mic was getting her red all over again.

"Hey, Hikari-chan, it's not too late, so wanna switch with me?" Mashiron pleaded. "You're a masochist, so punishments are right up your alley, aren't they?"

"Hmm... Hikari would *maybe* want to switch if it were something like having to be everyone's chair for the rest of the stream..."

"Okay, great idea, we're changing the batsu then."

"Oh no, Mashiro-chan. Look, your viewers are waiting for it," Chami-chan

said.

“Let’s go, Maaashiron! Show us that streamer spirit!” I cheered.

"Guh... I'll remember this..."

We all listened closely and waited. Chami-chan in particular had jammed her earphones in as deep as they would go and was listening with her eyes closed.

Eventually, Mashiron seemed to make her peace, because she moved closer to the mic and opened her mouth.

“Ah, I...love...you.”

ω

: Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah... Hah..... Hah.....
Hah..... KABOOM (Miles Dyson)

: smiling so hard that my chin's turning into Blue-Eyes
Ultimate Jonouchi

: ¥50,000

: ¥50,000

: /dead

$$\vdots$$
$$\vdots$$
$$\vdots$$

“A-All right, we’re done! I-It’s, um, you know! Just a show of appreciation! Time for the next segment! Er... Huh? Wha? Awa-chan, why are you pinning me down? Huh? Chami-chan, you too? Um, er, having two people on top of me is kinda heavy... H-Hey, why aren’t you saying anything? I’m getting extremely scared now, you know? H-Hikari-chan, save me! I’m being attacked by beasts! Whu-huh?! Why did you bury yourself under me?! No, no, I have *no* idea what you mean by wanting to be crushed! Aaaaaugh, someone, just save meeeee!!!!”

Mashiron once again fled into the bathroom. Hey, come out here and let me ride(-ing duel) you! If you don't, I'm gonna have to Jack Off by Synchro Summoning with two or more Tuner monsters!

We may have won the game, but we lost to Mashiron.

Hours passed, and soon, it was time for dinner.

Dinner was mainly going to be prepared by Chami-chan and I since we were the ones who could cook. Today was a celebration, so we decided to make the perfect food for a gathering like this: takoyaki. Yep, we were having a takoyaki party. Chami-chan had gathered the ingredients beforehand, so we got right to cooking.

"I'm realizing this kind of late...but if all we're doing is making the batter, the others could probably handle that too."

"Now now, Chami-chan, we can at least show 'em our skills at cutting ingredients," I reassured her.



Hikari-chan had a takoyaki pan somewhere in her house, so we had her and Mashiron get it ready. Hikari-chan's place really had everything, huh?

Now then, where was the cutting board...?

"Oh, Mashiron, can you come here for a sec?"

"Hm? What's up?"

"Oh, you know, I can't seem to find the cutting board anywhere, so I sure am glad you're here! They don't call you the Walking Cutting Board for n— BWAHPHH?!"

I called Mashiron into the kitchen to joke about using her as a cutting board, but then I got punched in the gut. She caught me off guard, but she was still too weak for it to hurt.

The next thing I knew, someone was right by our side with sparkles in her eyes.

"No, Hikari-chan, I can tell what you're hoping for with how you're showing me your stomach, but I don't hurt the innocent, you know? Now pull your shirt back down, your tummy's gonna get cold."

"Whaaa? No fair, Awayuki-chan gets all the fun!"

"Hikari-chan! If you say the name of a flat object, you can get her to bully you for free!"

"Huh? Something flat? Ah! Mashiron, you Whomp King!"

"All right, Hikari-chan, prepare for a hell that goes far beyond mere pain. Also, why did you add 'King' to that?"

"Because it sounds stronger that way!"

"You do *not* need to go making me stronger!"

With that, Mashiron started tickling Hikari-chan's exposed torso. Two girls giggling at each other, huh...

"Ah, what a lovely sight..."

"Come on, Awayuki-chan, we need to quit playing around and cut the

ingredients. I found a cutting board too.”

“Huh, Chami-chan’s acting...dependable?!”

“Why do you sound so surprised? We’re the ones handling the cooking, so we won’t have anything good to eat if we don’t get it together.”

“Ch-Chami-chan! You’re so right! This is our turn, and when you make a choice, there’s no time for second-guesses! All right, what should I start cutting first...”

I dug through our bag of groceries.

“Chami-chan.”

“What is it?”

“Where’s the octopus?”

“I’ll sprint back and buy some.”

“Chami-chaaan...”

I looked all through our groceries and couldn’t find the octopus. Even though we somehow had cheese and wieners...

Chami-chan had made her choice and not second-guessed herself. That’s Live-On for you...

The pair handling the pan didn’t have much to do at the moment, so once the prep work was done, we had them go buy some octopus from a nearby supermarket.

“I’m sorry... I’m really, really sorry...”

“It’s fine, Chami-chan, really! If anything, Hikari got a huge kick out of being ordered around like some errand girl! Hikari should be thanking *you*!”

“A-A-A-A-Awayuki-chan! This girl is an angel!”

“That’s not an angel, that’s a masochist.”

“I mean, I could say the same about you and StroZero,” Mashiron pointed out.

“Wait, so in that example, is StroZero supposed to be on the level of

masochism? Mashiron, did you just dunk on me incredibly hard?”

The night went on like this as we chatted and filled up on takoyaki. Next in the schedule was...

“Okay, the mic’s set up. Is everyone ready? All right, then, time for the third gen mini-concert to start!”

The mini-concert. In other words, we were singing.

Yes, the very same plan that had caused Hikari-chan to ruin her throat. We’d obviously considered scrapping the idea after that incident, but in the end, we went through with it.

Why? Well, simply think back to that day when Chami-chan and I gathered at Hikari-chan’s house. Hikari-chan’s throat had mostly healed by that point, no? Simply put, Hikari-chan’s one-month hiatus was set up for one more reason besides giving her a chance to rest, and that reason was singing practice.

While she *was* put on hiatus from all streaming activities, having her do absolutely nothing at all wouldn’t have been great for her mental health either. Besides, our throats were the tools of our trade, so learning how to project one’s voice without stressing it surely wasn’t going to hurt. So we had Hikari-chan take voice-training lessons that wouldn’t exhaust her with a professional instructor. The focus was more on studying at the start of the hiatus when she couldn’t speak. Once her throat healed, the course got more serious. And Hikari-chan kept up her studies for this entire month.

That brought us to today. As for how Hikari-chan’s singing had changed, well...

: HEY! HEY!

: ♪♪♪

: YOOOO

: Man, Awayuki-chan is always so good at singing!

: lmao @ chami-chan actually raising her voice for once

: I just LOVE how calm Mashiron's singing voice is

: Hikari-chan's killing it!

: And they told us she ruined her throat by being *bad* at singing?

: For real, she's totally keeping up with the others!

I am SO taking credit for this! I smugly thought.

Hikari-chan swung her body to the beat of the song like she was having the time of her life. This time, our voices were definitely harmonizing as one.

Now then, it was time for the finale of this sleepover. We all finished our baths after the mini-concert and were now in our sleepwear. There was only one way to celebrate the end to a long, hard day...

“Cheeeeeeeers!” we all shouted.

It was time for drinks, of course!

gulp, gulp “Ooh, it really isn’t that sweet. But it still goes down easy, so I can’t say I dislike it,” Mashiron commented.

“It sure does,” Chami-chan agreed. “But going down easy makes it easier to drink past your limits, so it’s important to pace yourself...or so I read one time. This is my first time drinking too.”

“Yummy! Hikari wants to mix some Spirytus into this!”

“I have something to say to you! StroZero sure is the bomb, yo! Love, love, love, love, big love! Finally, I’ve found you, my princess! I now know the reason I was born! It was all to meet you! Let us walk through life together, in sickness and in health! I love you more than anything in this world! I love you so much!”

: Cheeeeeers!!! ¥10,000

: Pssh!!! ¥211

: I think this is my first time seeing Mashiron drink.

: Mixing Spirytus *in*? More like whatever drink you had is

pure Spirytus now.

: absolutely baffled to see my oshi profess her undying love for StroZero

: So uhhh, drinks are fine...but why is everyone drinking StroZero?!?!?!?

: what is this, a party in a broke college kid's dorm?

: the only reason you need to drink StroZero is StroZero, so no problem!

“Ah, these snacks Chami-chan made are delicious. I dig them,” Mashiron said.

“Really? I’m glad they suit your tastes,” Chami-chan replied.

“Hikari bought some sashimi during the supermarket trip earlier, so let’s eat these too!”

“Piiizza, paaasta, put it in a booox!” I belted out. “Deee-li-verrr it to my house and put it on—”

“Awa-chan, mute yourself!”

Ahhhh... Spending time with my precious genmates with my arm around my dear StroZero-chan... Being able to see this day was pure bliss! I couldn’t contain my joy!

“Phew, looks like Shuwa-chan’s joining the anniversary,” Mashiron commented. “Glad we’re all here.”

“Oh, you’re right! ’Sup, Shuwa-chan!”

“’Sup, Hikari-chan!”

“U-Um! Awayuki-chan, can I call you ‘Shuwa-chan’ when you’re drunk?”

“Chami-chan?! You’re asking this *now*?!”

“Sorry... I’ve always wanted to call you that, but I missed the timing to do it early on and I’ve been too nervous about it ever since. But this time, I swore to myself that I’d be brave and ask!”

“Whew, that sounds as Chami-chan as it gets... Well, of course you can. Today’s a day about getting closer than ever, woohoo!”

“I... Hooraaaaay!!!!”

After cheering for joy, Chami-chan took a hearty swig of StroZero. She had to be getting pretty drunk by now, right?

“Oh, I know how we can all get closer! Who’s up for an orgy?”

“A-Awayuki-san. Could I ask that you not crawl up to me?”

“Huhhh? What’s wrong, Mashiron? You didn’t act this distant when we first met...”

“Because I didn’t know all of the weird things that’d come out of your mouth back then. Also, I’d rather *not* get banned on our anniversary stream.”

“But we played the ‘I love you’ game earlier!”

“And I missed the part where that had anything to do with orgies.”

“‘I love you’ = ‘I love’ = Masturbating = Showing off how horny you are = Begging for me to have sex with you!”

“Ah... You have a point.”

“Huh? Mashiron, why are you agreeing...”

The playful atmosphere of our drinking party continued with me making one last hopeful push. We were all a bit tipsy by now and a lot of our conversations were veering toward the extreme, but I was still having so much fun that I couldn’t help myself.

But sadly...all fun times had to come to an end. As we shut down the stream, we all hoped that we could gather and celebrate together for next year’s anniversary too.

“Blrrrvvghh!!!”

“Chami-chan! Oh no, do you have to barf? Heck yeah! Go right ahead and spray it onto Hikari’s face!”

“Blrrrvvghh?!?!”

“Hey Shuwa-chan, wanna try *getting hard* together?”

“M-M-M-M-M-Mashiron, what are you saying?! You’ve had too much to drink! Do you even understand the words coming out of your mouth?!”

“Gnnnhhh...”

“And now she’s asleep!”

: wtf are they doing after that heartfelt goodbye lmao

: The collab between Hikari-chan's masochism and her blissful ignorance is bringing out some of the most perverted lines ever uttered in Live-On lmao

: Chami-chan was the one warning everyone else about drinking too much, and now she ends up being the biggest casualty...

: Mashiron used Horny! The Defending Shuwa-chan is now Confused!

: Shuwa-chan, do YOU even understand the words that always come out of your mouth?

: holy shit, mashiron aimed to kill

: Mashiro-chan?! Ahhh! Aaaaaaaah! (dead from teetee)

: She chickens out when it matters the most... What is she, a harem protag?

: oh i get it, gen three because that's how many brain cells they share

: forget anniversaries every year, they ought to celebrate every second that they don't get canned

: just collab forever imo

Next year...I’d make sure to go lighter on the drinks.

Epilogue

In the office of an entertainment company, two women sat at a table across from each other. The girl on one side wore a calm smile, while the girl on the other seemed to have a hint of sorrow in her expression.

The name of the former was Mana Hoshino, a living legend who'd stood at the forefront of the VTubing industry from its golden age until today. The latter was her manager, who'd supported her from behind the scenes this whole time.

"All right, Mana-san. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Yes. I haven't had a single regret since the day I first requested this."

Mana's manager closed her eyes for a few seconds to take in what Mana had said. Then she collected the documents that were in front of her and looked back at Mana.

"Very well, Mana-san. Tomorrow, we'll publish the video announcing that your graduation will be next month. It might be a bit early for me to say this, but thank you for everything you've done."

"Sure, same to you."

"You really, *really* have done so much..."

"Mane-chan..." Mana murmured.

The voice that the manager pushed out was incredibly quiet. Yet it carried the weight of a sorrowful wail, speaking to just how far their friendship exceeded their positions as mere coworkers.

There was one reason for this woman's sorrow. Mana Hoshino, the legendary VTuber, would be graduating. In other words, she'd decided to retire from VTubing, and she had just today gone through the process of confirming her graduation. It was the end of a legend.

After attempting to force a smile, the manager sighed, "I have to wonder

what this company will do after you graduate...”

Mana hand-waved her manager’s doubts away.

“What are you talking about? I’ve always just been one arm of this company’s business. A company this big isn’t gonna put all its eggs in one basket! Besides, I heard from the CEO a while back that our new VTuber avatar creation service has been getting rave reviews.”

“I mean, that’s all true! But we’ll probably move away from the business of VTuber management... It might have been a lot of work, but it was a fun job, so I’ll personally miss it.”

This company had no VTubers besides Mana Hoshino. In order to let Mana’s talents shine as much as possible, its VTuber management department focused entirely on supporting Mana’s solo activities instead of hiring new streamers. While this was partly a form of risk mitigation so that a company of this size could survive losing its place in the VTuber industry, it was more a sign of just how strong its trust in Mana was.

“All of that work just for one little VTuber, huh...”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re one of a kind.”

A few seconds of silence passed as the two faced each other. After a moment of seeming to savor this short time together, the manager returned to the business at hand.

“Now then, moving on to the content of the graduation stream we discussed. Here’s an outline of what we have so far.”

“Oh, it’s settled? Let me see! Hm, hmm... Whoa?! There’s a ton of famous streamers here! Wait, are they *all* coming?!”

“Yes. When we mentioned that it was for your graduation, everyone agreed on the spot. We still need to decide on the order of appearances, though.”

“For real? I’m starting to get nervous...”

“Also... Given the timing, we’ll consider any long-shot requests you might have as well.”

“Huh? Long-shot?”

“Yes. It’s the end, after all, so I negotiated with the higher-ups for permission to hear out any requests you might have for the contents of this stream. We’ve put you under some pretty strict regulations to protect your image, after all. Think of this current schedule as a work in progress, so don’t hesitate to change it around as much as you like. It’s the end, so ask for anything you want.”

“Really?! Ooh, let me think... Oh, so like, could I get involved on the production side of it?”

“Of course. If you have anything you want to do, ask away. You can decide later as well, though we’d naturally appreciate having decisions made earlier rather than later...”

“Holy smokes! That’s what I’m talking about! It never really bothered me, but management tended to get overprotective of me, you know?”

“Heh. We called just about all of the streamers you’re friends with, but if there’s anyone else you’d like to see, we’ll give them a call as well.”

“For real?! Let’s see, then how about this?”

It seemed that Mana already had some people in mind. Her manager happily noted down the names Mana provided.

“Also...can I invite people I haven’t met before?”

“People you haven’t met? We’ll give them a call, sure.”

“Really? You’re sure about this?”

“Y-Yes.”

Mana’s unusual persistence made her manager seem a bit uneasy, but Mana just smiled and said,

“In that case, I think I’ll call over a legendary streamer.”

And so, her request was made...

Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume five of *VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral after Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream*, also known as *VTuber Legend*. I'm the writer, Nana Nanato.

We're already at Volume 5, huh? While this series was an original work from the start, it was something close to a fan work based on real VTubers. And now, we're halfway to double digits. It's all thanks to everyone who continues to read this series.

Now then, Volume 5's story centered on the third generation. I hope you all enjoyed it. I think Hikari stood out in particular; her tendency to work a little too hard led to all sorts of events, from serious to comedic.

I get the feeling that even in the real world, VTubers overworking themselves at the cost of their health is a common problem. That said, partly for reasons I touched upon in this volume, I imagine that it's not so easy for them to take a break.

I'm a light-novel author, not a streamer, so it might not be my place to say much, but as someone supporting these VTubers, I want them to be happy.

In the next volume, you can expect the same focus on comedy as usual, but we'll also expand on Mana Hoshino following her initial appearance in Volume 5. We'll also touch upon something that the story has avoided until now to an unnatural degree, to the point where you could consider it foreshadowing: Awayuki's family.

Volume 6 will include a number of episodes that proved to be very popular in the web version and serve as a compilation of the story thus far, so if that goes on sale, I'd appreciate your continued support.

Finally, I'd like to close out this afterword by telling the many people involved with adding life to Volume 5, as well as the readers who support me, that I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

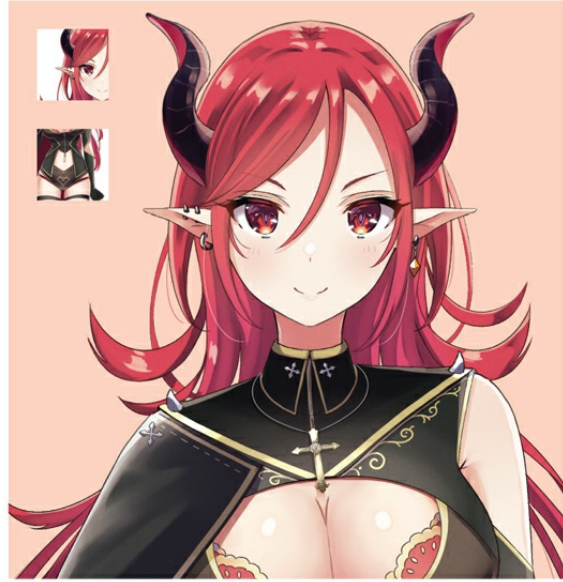
Thank you for picking up Volume 5. Let's meet again in Volume 6.



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"Heya! It's me—the sunlight in everyone's hearts, Hareru Asagiri!"

An energetic high school girl who loves putting smiles on everyone's faces. Extremely curious and—carried by her momentum—frequently does or says things that nobody would have ever expected.



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"Hey, ladies and gents! It's your girl, Sei-sama!"

In her past life, she was a succubus who lived off the vigor of men, but died of starvation since she only ever showed interest in other women. She reincarnated, bringing us to today. Her horns are a holdover from that past life.



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"Kon-miko, everyone! It's everyone's mama, Shion Kaminari!"

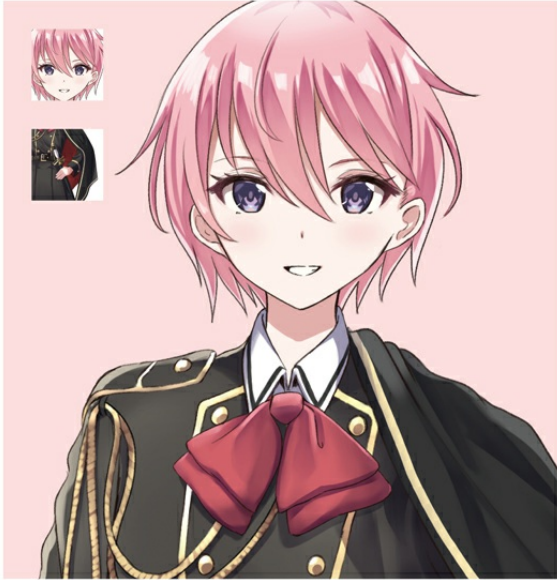
A shrine maiden whose body is inhabited by a nine-tailed fox and who safeguards the people as a servant of the kami. Because of how fiercely her nine fluffy tails swing around based on her emotions, caution is needed when standing behind her.



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"Nya-nyan! I caught a whiff of something great and came running!"

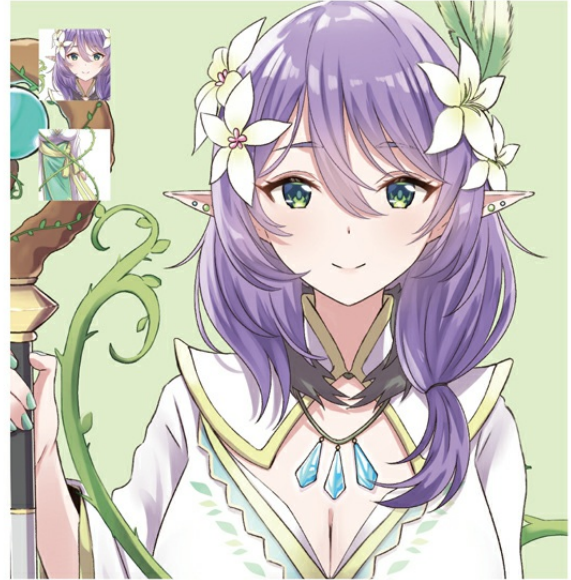
A beast girl with heterochromia who loves naps—but whenever she sees someone close by eating food, she immediately gets up and goes over to them with sparkling eyes. She'll be happy if you give her something. She'll also be happy if you pet her, even if you don't give her anything.



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"Ma'am! Alice Soma, at your service!"

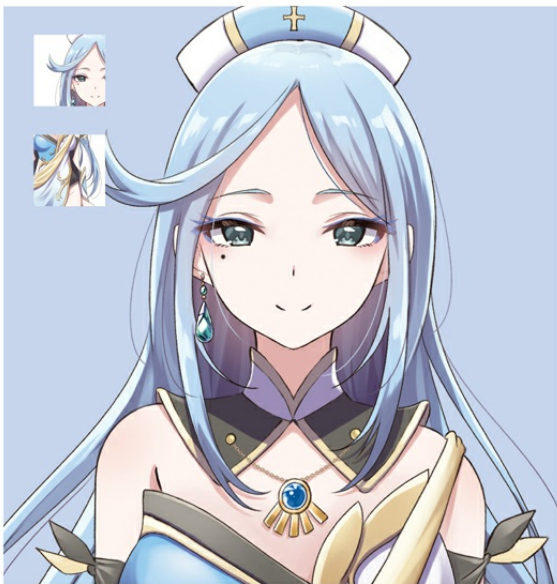
A member of the Resistance, an idol group focused on self-liberation. Her cool looks make her popular with men and women alike, but inside she's somewhat incompetent, so she works hard to protect her image.



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An elven zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo, a major theme park featuring every animal under the sun. Respected to the point of complete obedience by all the animals there, for some reason.



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An illustrator who lives to draw. While she can be a little scathing with her remarks, she's actually a kind, friendly girl.



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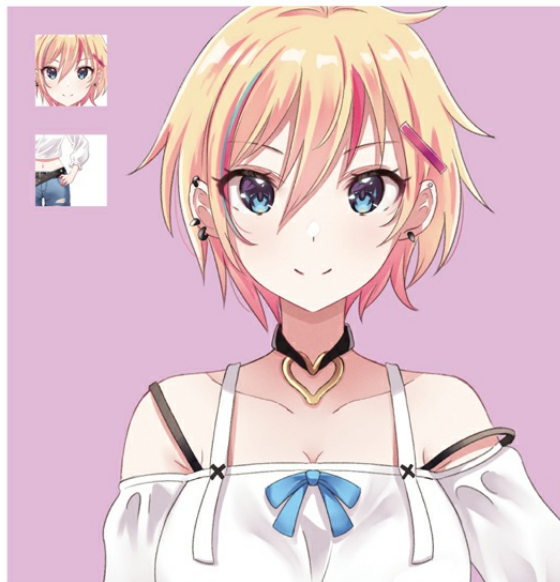
A mysterious beauty who only appears on days when a light snow is falling. Her purple eyes draw you in with the promise of something hidden deep inside them...



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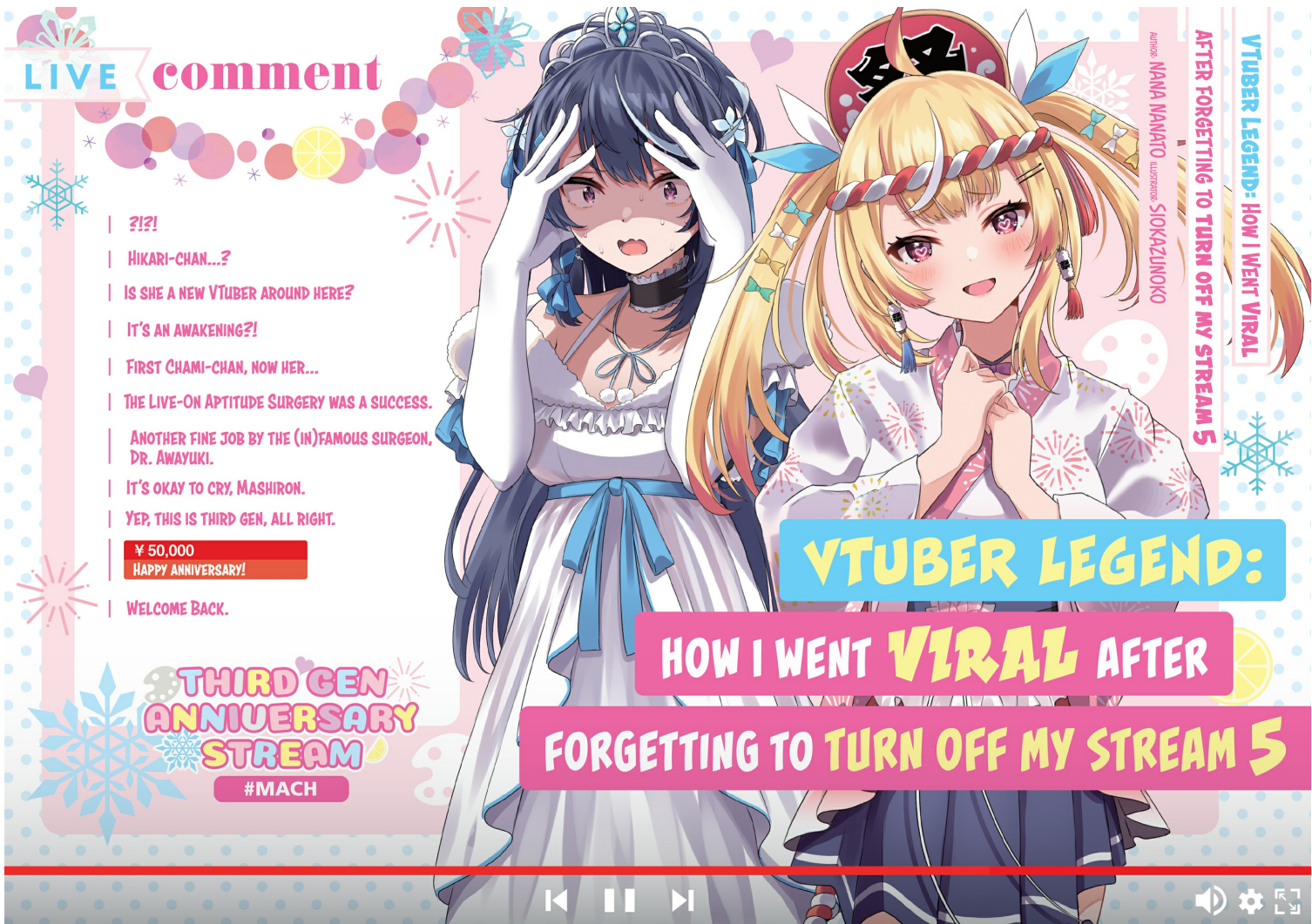
A festival girl who appears at festivals throughout Japan. Some say she's even appeared at the same time in two different festivals held in separate places.



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Originally a gloomy character, but rallied her courage and debuted as a sunny one—to thunderous applause. Inside, though, she hasn't changed, making her a gloomy character wearing the skin of a sunny one.



LIVE comment

- | ?!?!
- | HIKARI-CHAN...?
- | IS SHE A NEW VTUBER AROUND HERE?
- | IT'S AN AWAKENING?!
- | FIRST CHAMI-CHAN, NOW HER...
- | THE LIVE-ON APTITUDE SURGERY WAS A SUCCESS.
- | ANOTHER FINE JOB BY THE (IN)FAMOUS SURGEON, DR. AWAYUKI.
- | IT'S OKAY TO CRY, MASHIRON.
- | YEP, THIS IS THIRD GEN, ALL RIGHT.
- | ¥ 50,000
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!
- | WELCOME BACK.

THIRD GEN
ANNIVERSARY
STREAM
#MACH

VTUBER LEGEND:

HOW I WENT **VIRAL** AFTER
FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 5

VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL

AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 5

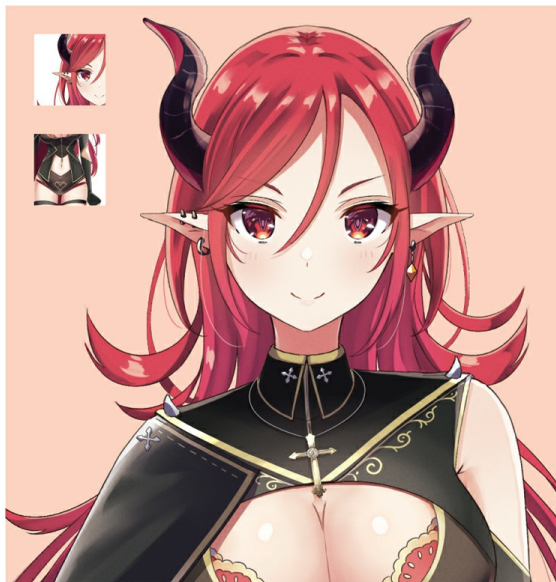
AUTHOR NANA MANATO
ILLUSTRATOR SIOKAZUNOKO



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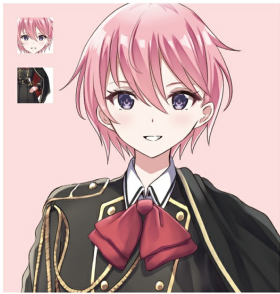
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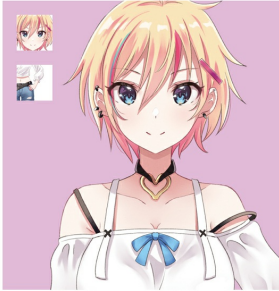
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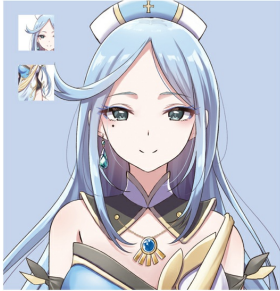
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"HUH?"

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"HIKARI-CHAN,
I THINK I
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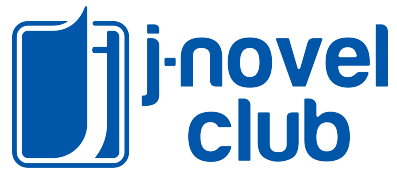
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VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral after Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream
Volume 5

by Nana Nanato

Translated by airco Edited by Alexandra Fresch

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